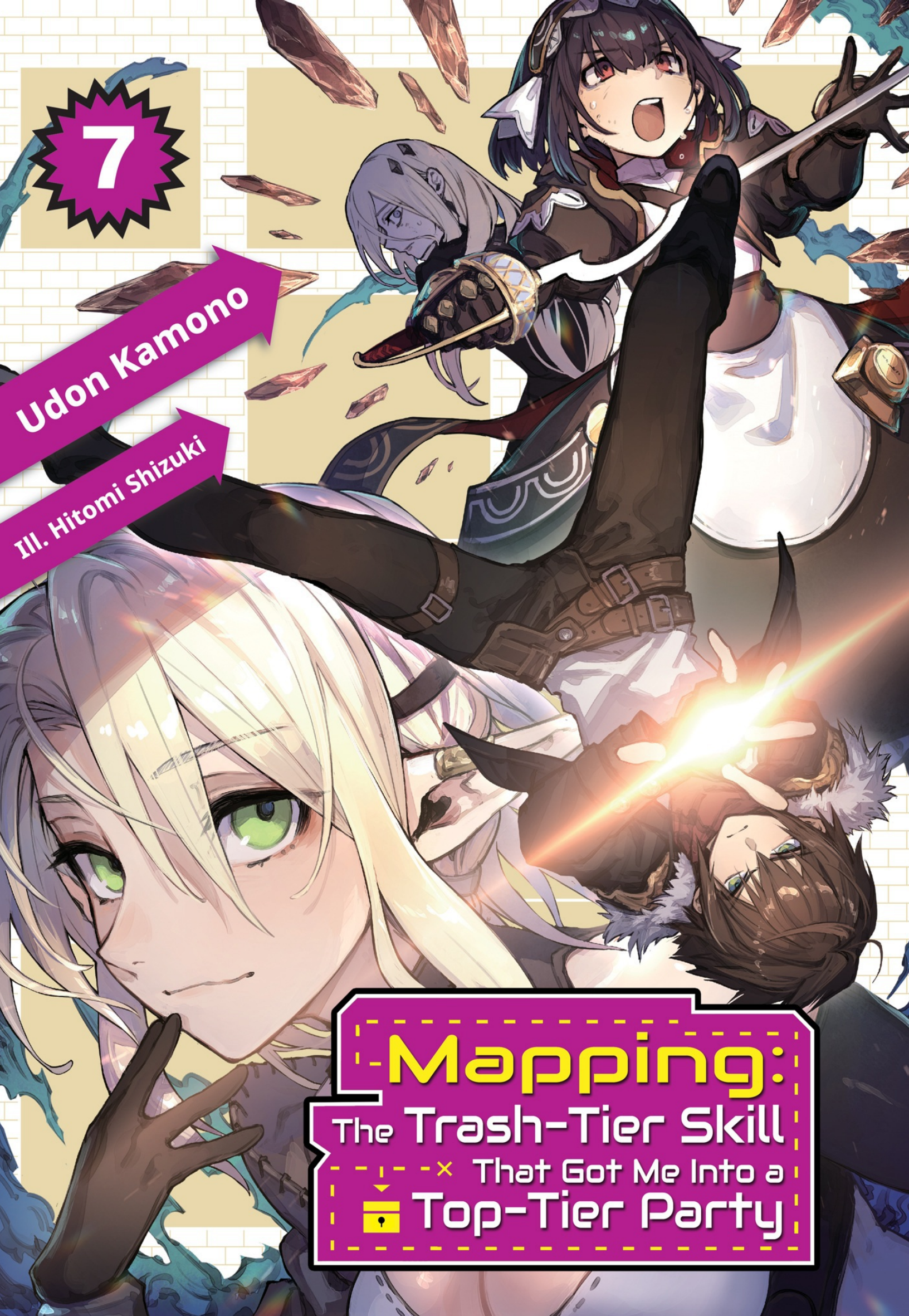




7

Udon Kamono

III. Hitomi Shizuki

Mapping:
The Trash-Tier Skill
✕ That Got Me Into a
🗡️ Top-Tier Party





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Ill. Hitomi Shizuki





"WHAT ARE
YOU LYING
THERE FOR?
KIND OF A
DANGEROUS
SPOT FOR
A NAP!"

◀ Note
Athlon

"ACCOMPLICES...
THAT DOESN'T
SOUND TOO BAD."

"WE'RE
SECRET-KEEPING
ACCOMPLICES
NOW."

△
Sofie



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The Newest Member of the Arrivers

Fame, fortune, magic, wisdom... Endless treasure and bounty lay within the otherworldly depths of the land—depths yet to be conquered that beckon people with the intangible power of curiosity. Be it in the name of hopes and dreams or greed and self-interest, adventurers from all walks of life risked everything to challenge the dungeons.

One of many daring groups was the Arrivers, our party who once held the remarkable claim of being the closest to actually clearing a dungeon. We disbanded after losing Jin in action, and though we'd somehow managed to pull ourselves back together since...we were still down a party member.

In the search for a new one, we'd run afoul of Tyrant Princess Leyfa. I'd borrowed the power of the Headhunter's name to resolve the situation—or so I'd thought. Then I found out that my childhood friend, Miya, had joined Leyfa's party and caused another stir. Leyfa's attendant Sofie was kicked out in the process and left to wander the streets, so I'd decided to invite her to join the Arrivers just minutes ago.

Now that we had a full party again, we could finally get back to making progress in the dungeon! Of course, things never go that smoothly. As always, we were in the middle of confronting the problem at hand...

"I know, I know," I said. "I can imagine how you all must feel right now. It's perfectly understandable to be apprehensive..."

"You went and decided this all on your own again. You could've given us at least one word of advance notice, you know?" Erin sighed, half-irritated and half-exhausted.

I understood where she was coming from, of course. Had I been in her shoes, I would've felt the exact same way. As for what I'd actually done to make her so unhappy...

"I know. I'm sorry. That's why I'm consulting you guys now. Okay, yeah, it's

kind of completely ex post facto... Sorry. I shouldn't have decided that Sofie should join on my own."

I was being scolded for making the all-important decision of recruiting a new member all on my lonesome. And I completely deserved it. After losing Jin, we were a team of five. I couldn't just bust through the door declaring I'd found our newest member when I wasn't even the party leader, and that's not even broaching the fact that the newest member in question was an enemy until very recently... It'd be weirder if the rest of the party *weren't* a little miffed.

For now, I kept my head lowered to express my contrition, but I didn't regret what I'd done. Leyfa had given Sofie the boot and she'd had nowhere to go—it was my one and only chance to recruit her. There wasn't time to ask her to wait while I discussed things with the rest of the party. If I'd let the opportunity slip past me, she would've disappeared to who-knows-where. I couldn't just let her go like that.

"I'm afraid even I have to side with Erin on this one. This is the second time you've acted completely on your own, Note," Roslia threw in.

The first incident in question was my going to confront Leyfa solo. Since I couldn't reveal my connection to the Headhunter to just anyone, I'd been forced to enact my plan without the rest of the party. They forgave me under the extenuating circumstances, but this was my second offense now. And it was an entirely different matter with a new member involved.

"I do feel bad about it," I said.

"I don't trust you at all..." she mumbled.

"You don't either, huh, Roslia?" Erin asked.

"Absolutely not. It's Note we're dealing with here. He's *definitely* going to do it again."

"I really am sorry..."

It was pretty terrifying to have the normally bickering duo gang up on me... It was like they'd united against a common enemy (that is, me).

"If the other members are against it, then you don't have to let me join..."

Sofie quietly mumbled, breaking her silence. “I can just leave...”

We’d returned to HQ straight from Leyfa’s place, luggage and all, but Sofie was still in the dumps. It was hard to see the confident knight who’d once served under Leyfa in her. If someone had told me that *this* was Sofie’s true nature, I would’ve believed them. She meekly listened to Erin and Roslia’s objections without raising a word in her own defense.

“Hey, don’t be like that! We need you in our party, Sofie,” I assured her.

“It doesn’t seem like they really want me here, though...”

“They’re just saying that, you know? Erin and Roslia are really all for you joining us...aren’t you?”

“I’m against it. You know she worked for that nasty princess. We can’t trust her.”

“I’m against it too. After she kidnapped Neme and attacked you, I can’t say I think much of her.”

“They’re...just saying that?” Sofie murmured with a confused look.

C’mon, ladies! I get how you feel, but take a hint!

Sofie was a lot more vulnerable than I’d previously believed—especially right now, after being discharged by a master she’d devoted herself to. I had to pick my words carefully or risk breaking her altogether.

“Sofie knows what she’s done. And she’s sorry about attacking me and all that, right?” I asked, turning to her.

“I mean, I suppose...” she mumbled.

“See?”

“Let me ask her this, then,” said Erin. “If the princess wanted you to bring her Note’s head right now, would you attack him?”

“If Princess Leyfa so ordered, yes.”

“She isn’t sorry at all!”

Hey, Sofie, I thought we were friends! She answered without missing a beat too... Damn. I’d known Sofie was loyal to a fault, but I was really hoping she’d

deny her attachment to Leyfa in the moment, even if it meant lying.

“What do you think, Force? You’ve been quiet this whole time.”

Backed into a corner, I turned to Force for a lifeline. As the leader of the Arrivers, his opinion carried more weight than the rest of ours. If he agreed to this, it’d be closer to a done deal; and if he disapproved, then I’d seriously have to rethink my options.

“As long as she can get us closer to clearing the dungeon, I don’t care if she’s an enemy or downright evil. She’s just gotta be strong.”

“I’m weak,” Sofie countered. “I just lost to an adventurer named Miya...”

“Miya? As in Note’s childhood friend?” Force asked. “If you lost to someone like that, then I don’t have high hopes.”

“Your standards are just warped. Miya’s plenty strong,” I argued.

Miya was a top-class adventurer—one of the best in the country. She hadn’t made much of a name for herself because she kept her skills hidden, but her skills alone made her extraordinarily powerful. Force... Force was just that much stronger, so comparing her to him wasn’t fair.

“What about you, Miss Neme?” I asked, turning to the final member of our party.

Honestly, I was expecting our tiny party priestess to be opposed to it. Sofie had kidnapped her, after all. She’d been treated well while she was held captive, but I could still understand not wanting to call her former abductor a teammate all of a sudden.

“Neme has no objections. Since you brought her here, Note, she must be trustworthy! So if it means we can get back in the dungeon soon, then she’s welcome in my book!”

“Neme!”

“That hurts, Note!”

I was so overjoyed that I’d swept her up into a hug without thinking. It was just so lonely having everyone against me! I’d thought no one was on my side, but here I’d had an unexpected supporter all along. I should’ve known I could

count on Neme. I'd actually spent more time with her than any of the other Arrivers since joining the party. She was a good friend to me. I should have opened the discussion by talking to her first.



“Must be nice getting a hug like that... Maybe I should agree with him too.”

“Casually thinking of betraying me, Erin? I’m disappointed.”

I ignored the two girls bickering behind me. Seriously, why were they even fighting? They could at least *try* to be friends when they were on the same side.

“So for now, it’s two against two. Count me neutral,” Force said, summarizing the discussion before things got any more complicated.

The situation seemed oddly familiar. Hadn’t we gone through this exactly when Roslia joined the party? Back then, Force and I were for, while Erin and Neme were against and Jin was the neutral party.

“I guess we’ll have to decide the same way...” I sighed.

“I was just about to suggest that myself,” Force agreed.

We were apparently on the same page. I could tell we were thinking the same thing by the look in his eyes.

“What do you mean by ‘the same way’? Do the Arrivers have an established way to settle things like this?” asked Erin, none the wiser to what we were talking about.

“You know,” Force said, turning to her, “there’s only one way for a dungeon party to settle things, isn’t there?”

“Do you mean—”

Force answered before she could finish, “It’s time for a dungeon run.”

*

Back when we were debating about whether to let Roslia join the party, we’d taken her for an excursion to test her abilities. That was how she’d become our sixth member, and we were going to give Sofie the same test now. As soon as she was completely recovered, the lot of us set off for the dungeon.

We were currently on floor 5. It hadn’t been that long since I was last here. The memories of it were still fresh in my mind. This was the wasteland floor where Roslia and I had babysat the Ultimate Invincible Partyz back when we’d first returned to Puriff.

Sofie had only cleared through floor 4 with Leyfa's party. An early floor like this was no match for the Arrivers, but since it was as far as Sofie could go, it was the best we could do to test out her talents. The monsters here were pretty basic—your average beast, bird, and humanoid-type mobs that were commonly found on the surface.

Of course, the dungeon versions were much stronger than their surface counterparts, but there was nothing particularly devious or tricky about handling them. As long as you kept an eye on their numbers, it would be a simple, straightforward fight. And yet...

"It's impossible. I don't think I can live up to your expectations."

Sofie sounded defeated from the get-go. How should I put this? It was like her thought process had gone totally dark. Like she was a completely different person without Leyfa around. Her encounter with Miya may have had a hand in crushing her confidence, but I was really starting to worry about her.

"Is she going to be all right? It doesn't seem like she'll be able to handle being in the Arrivers..." Erin muttered, nervously watching on as well.

"I hope so," I replied earnestly.

I was the one who'd recommended Sofie, after all. I'd fought with her twice, and I could read her threat level thanks to Enemy Search. I knew she was much stronger than your average adventurer, so all that remained to be seen was how much of that strength she could bring to bear in battle.

"Your battle style is knight, so you'll be okay fighting alone, right?" I asked.

Knight was generally a well-balanced role. Knights specialized in both offense and defense, and while they couldn't recover like paladins, they had abilities that helped them excel in individual combat. We would've had Roslia tank if we were testing a rear-line candidate like a mage, but Sofie was a frontliner herself. The plan was to send her in solo.

"Yeah," she replied.

"Then we won't help even if you're in danger!" Roslia taunted.

"So be it if it's my fate to die here. It was a miserable life anyway..."

“Hey, at least jump in to help her if she’s in danger! And you, Sofie! Don’t be so quick to accept death!” I yelled.

There’d be no end to this conversation if we kept at it, so I figured it was time to get things started. I activated Enemy Search to locate some monsters. The floor was pretty vast, but there were plenty of mobs around. I spotted one instantly and ran toward it alone, then used Bloodlust to draw its attention.

Now I just had to lure it back to my party. Once Erin and the others were within sight, I signaled them. Sofie seemed to understand the gesture—she was to defeat the monsters I brought her way. The moment I passed by her, she drew the rapier at her waist and charged straight at the beast.

“Six Thrusts!”

I knew this move. (She’d used it on me before.) Her silver blade darted through the air toward the hound-like monster in multiple strikes. She landed a stab in each of its front legs and eyes, then two in the snout. And when she was done attacking, she deflected the charging hound to her right.

With nothing to kill its momentum, the beast went sliding headfirst into the ground. It had suffered a heavy blow, but it was clinging to life. Using the last of its strength, it let out a loud, echoing howl—a signal. The number of hostile presences around us suddenly increased. It was the start of a so-called chain battle that this floor was notorious for. Monsters began streaming toward us. Sofie now realized what she was up against.

“There are so many of them...” she muttered.

“Please defeat them all,” I said.

“All of them...?”

Her dim eyes darkened even more. We couldn’t have her giving up so easily. The Arrivers sought to clear a dungeon that no one had ever conquered before. She’d have to take down a lot more than what floor 5 had to offer along the way.

“Hahh...” With a heavy sigh, Sofie adjusted the grip on her rapier and ran the hound on the ground through to finish it off. “I’ll do what I can.”

She then turned to the monsters coming at her and let fly a high-speed thrust.

“Next!”

After she felled a second and third monster, more began swooping down from the skies. They were avian monsters resembling falcons, and they dive-bombed Sofie with razor-sharp talons.

“Hyah!”

She thrust again, this time for a raptor’s midsection. The bird evaded it at the last second, crying out once as it circled overhead and tried dive-bombing her again.

“How annoying...”

With that, Sofie stabbed her rapier into the ground and let the raptor come at her without any show of defending herself. Its talons dug deep into her face.

“Sofie!” Roslia yelled in spite of herself.

It was clearly a direct hit, but Sofie proceeded to grab the falcon by its leg and slam it into the dirt with all her might. She then snatched up her rapier and skewered the bird on the ground.

“I can handle this much,” she said...her voice and her face completely unaffected. There wasn’t a single scratch on her, much less any sign of blood.

“What the...”

Sofie answered everyone’s surprise by saying, “I have the Iron Wall skill. An attack of this level would never hurt me.”

Even as she stood talking to us, monsters assailed her one after another. She made no effort to fend off their attacks, yet she was completely unharmed. She didn’t even look like she was in pain.

I suddenly found myself recalling that rainy morning Sofie assaulted me. I’d nailed her with countless Palm Shots, but aside from reacting to the sheer force of the blows, she hadn’t shown any sign whatsoever that they affected her. So that was thanks to her skill eating all of the damage from my attack, huh? I’d been worried that I’d forgotten how to use my arts or something, but it all made sense now.

The monsters seemed to realize their attacks weren't working on Sofie and switched to keeping their distance from her. She swiftly dispatched all the stunned monsters, reducing their numbers by the minute.

"It's a solid fighting style," Force muttered. I had to agree with him.

The Arrivers had always been a fairly aggressive party. Force and Jin were frontline fighters, and our rear-line mage was attack oriented too. Even Roslia, our paladin, had the extremely powerful Holy Sword Fractus at her disposal. She was only playing up her defensive powers to fill a void in our party. But now Sofie had appeared with a naturally tanky fighting style. Her sword skills were vastly inferior to Force's, but her ability to tangle with multiple monsters and walk away unharmed was incredibly useful. And Iron Wall wasn't the only skill she had...

"Fuerte-Tierra-Cárcel."

I could instantly tell it was spirit magic from the way it sounded. The monsters that were fleeing from Sofie were immediately enclosed in a prison made of rising earth. Sofie then went around harvesting kills while they were trapped.

"Was that spirit magic?" Erin asked her.

"Yes. I can use spells of the earth element."

Spirit magic was extremely conducive to frontline roles. It had the potential drawback of being strongly influenced by the surrounding environment, which limited its strength and usefulness in certain situations, but there were other benefits. The actual magic of so-called spirit magic came from the contracted spirit. The caster merely channeled some of their power by offering up magical energy in exchange. This made it easy to cast spells while doing other things (like swinging a sword), and it didn't require any study of arcane formulas like regular magic did. Both had their advantages, but spirit magic had more benefits for up-front fighters.

"So, what do you think, Force?" I asked.

"Her abilities are up to snuff."

Naturally, Force gave his approval. Sofie had surpassed our expectations. The fact she could handle this floor by herself so easily—when the likes of the

Ultimate Invincible Partyz had struggled to handle it together—was ample proof that she more than met the minimum standard.

Better yet, Sofie actually had a skillset we were lacking. If she joined us as a tank, Erin could make better use of her already high-power magic. It would potentially free up Roslia for offense too. Moreover, Sofie had a third skill called High Appraisal, which allowed her to see other people's skills. It might even have the power to identify gimmicks like the anti-healing field on floor 21 that had nearly gotten us all killed.

In short, Sofie was a highly desirable candidate. Sure, she was a little mentally unstable right now and there was no denying the possibility that she might betray us for Leyfa at any given point... But even after factoring in all those flaws, I felt she was a worthwhile addition to our party. The final outcome now would be up to what everyone else thought now. This wasn't something I could well and truly decide on my own. I continued to watch Sofie fight, resigning myself to whatever might come of this demonstration.

*

After clearing floor 5, we returned to HQ. We put our things down in our rooms and then gathered in the living room. Sofie, who didn't have a room of her own here, idly stood in the middle of the living room waiting for us.

Five pairs of eyes fell on her. Should she be accepted into the party, or should she be turned away? Everyone stared at her discerningly as they considered their answer.

As the person who'd suggested bringing her on board to begin with, I knew I needed to speak up first. "So, what does everyone think of Sofie joining the party?" I asked, smiling faintly to brighten the tense atmosphere.

The first to respond was Force. "I'm all right with it."

One down! Swinging that vote was important. Force was originally neutral about Sofie joining. He was technically the easiest to convince since he was only concerned about her combat potential, but his opinion had a special gravitas to it. He was our party leader, after all. That role didn't mean as much in the Arrivers as it did with other adventuring parties, but if he'd been strongly opposed to Sofie joining, I likely would've had to give up on her altogether.

“Now three people agree! We can go dungeon diving again, yay!” Neme immediately reacted to Force’s agreement vote. It seemed her position hadn’t shifted at all.

I mean, I hadn’t expected her to change her mind after seeing what Sofie could do in battle, so this was basically all according to plan... But nevertheless, I was happy anyway. We now had three votes, just like Neme said, which gave us the majority. Now all that remained was hearing from the dissenters.

“Force stood us up,” Roslia sighed. It seemed she was still opposed.

“Listen here, Roslia. Now’s the time to use your wiles for good. Get Force to turn on them!” Erin declared. She was apparently still opposed herself.

“Roger that!” Roslia replied, seemingly on board with this crazy plan. “Listen to me, Force. Sofie’s a bad woman. You’re being deceived. Please come to your senses.”

She looked up at him with dewy eyes—a special manipulation tactic of hers.

In response, he said flat out, “Nah. No matter how you look at it, Sofie isn’t trying to fool us.”

Phew! He hadn’t fallen for it. It seemed we’d be okay after all. Force used to be a sucker when it came to cute girls, but he’d genuinely changed his ways. He could now stand up to Roslia without letting her walk all over him.

“Erin, I’ve failed!” she cried.

“Guess your wiles aren’t worth much after all...” Erin snarked.

“The real problem here was the strategy,” Roslia mumbled unhappily.

I turned to her and asked, “Why are you so against Sofie in the first place?”

“Because she’s raised her sword against you, Note. We can’t let someone so dangerous into the party.”

“I told you, she’s...probably...sorry for that.”

“That’s not good enough. Anyone insolent enough to try to harm you even once shouldn’t be allowed in.”

“Weren’t you after me too when we first met?”

“Um, hmm... Can I change my vote now?”

“Now you’re turning on *me*!” Erin shrieked.

Even I was surprised by how quickly Roslia flipped, and I was the one pushing for it. Erin continued to object, but Roslia had already walked over to our side of the room.

“Uh, are you sure about this?” I had to ask.

“Personally, I wasn’t that against it in the first place. I just thought my refusal to forgive someone who’d tried to hurt you would endear me to you.”

“Hey now...”

Please stop trying to use every opportunity to your advantage when we’re talking serious business. It’s going to backfire on you. In the end, Roslia was just...being Roslia. You could say this was business as usual for her.

“Wait, am I the only one against it now?” Indeed, Erin was now the lone dissenter. All eyes fell on her. “Hold on, don’t look at me like that. Y-You’re making me seem like the villain!”

“Erin *did* say she would bully Sofie into leaving if she joined the party,” said Roslia.

“Don’t put words in my mouth! I never said anything like that!” Erin shouted.

“She acts all coy in front of Note, but she’s really vicious when it’s just us girls together.”

“Hey! Stop trying to lower my affection points at every turn! It’s not true, Note!”

“Yeah, I know.”

If anything, that was more like Roslia. Erin wasn’t shrewd enough to put on an act in front of other people. She’d have more friends if she did.

“I don’t want to join the party if there’s someone against me being here,” Sofie muttered.

This type of banter was typical for the Arrivers, but she didn’t know that. She probably thought we were having a serious fight, and she was ready to leave

instead of stoking further conflict.

Erin seemed to feel guilty about it, as she hurriedly changed her tune. “I’m not saying no outright, you know! I’m just saying we should consider things carefully in terms of choosing a new member...”

She had totally said no outright at the start, but I decided to overlook that part.

“We *were* originally enemies, after all. I just don’t think it would work out well for us...”

“I cannot argue.” Sofie slowly lowered her head. With her eyes cast downward, she said, “I hurt your party, and I don’t feel any particular remorse for that. I owe Princess Leyfa more than I can ever repay. I do not regret following her orders.”

I could hear Erin swallow her breath. The other members also seemed tense.

“But I also feel indebted to you all. Note looked out for me, Neme took care of me... I want to repay those debts as well.”

Sofie’s concept of gratitude meant more to her than we’d realized. It wasn’t something she was willing to concede.

“It doesn’t have to be in the form of joining your party. I’m sure there are other ways I can repay you. But if what you require is a new party member and I happen to fulfill those requirements, then...” There, Sofie raised her head. “I will devote myself to conquering the dungeon with you. Even if it means risking my life, I promise to take you all to the end of the dungeon.”

Sofie’s quiet resolve shook me a little, and it seemed to affect Erin as well. She scratched at her cheek awkwardly as she replied, “R-Right... In that case, I think you *should* repay us.”

That was as good as a “yes” vote to me, even if it was in a very roundabout Erin-esque fashion. But she wasn’t done yet.

“There’s one more thing,” she said. Sofie stiffened up when she heard this. “There’s no need for you to risk your life. We’re going to clear the dungeon without losing a single one of us.”

Okay, I had to take it back. Even Erin could be earnestly straightforward at times. She sure had mellowed out.

Anyway, that's the story of how Sofie officially joined the Arrivers.

The Princess's Legion and Plan B

Leyfa Southerndall looked around the room and nodded quietly at the five people she'd gathered. There was Gilbert Einzach, the incredible war priest who was once known as the highest-ranking inquisitor. There was Onz Gregory, a wanted man from a neighboring nation who had committed many evil deeds while earning a name for himself as a peerless brawler. There was Mille Gundak, the youngest of the impressively talented Seven Sages and one of the very few in history to support the royal palace. And then there was Miya Line, the half-elf who'd appeared out of nowhere and demonstrated her overwhelming power by defeating Sofie.

The princess also had a sixth person in attendance as a backup. Together, they comprised her very own dungeon party, the Princess's Legion. She was displeased that she'd failed to recruit Note Athlon as her navigator, but she'd made up for that loss by finding a strong replacement for Sofie in Miya. She wanted to believe she'd come out even, but Miya clearly still had room to grow. If she gained enough experience in the dungeon, she could potentially surpass Gilbert one day—that was how much value Leyfa saw in her.

Nevertheless, the princess was still missing a critical part of the dungeon-clearing equation, for she still had no navigator. Mapping was once considered a trash-tier skill among adventurers, but thanks to Note Athlon, it was now indispensable to serious dungeon divers. The early and middle floors were perfectly traversable without it. But the unexplored end floors? That was a different matter entirely. Leyfa didn't have Liberation's tricks of the trade, so her party would be forced to rely on a Mapping member like the Arrivers did. The princess knew this better than anyone...which was precisely why she'd summoned a certain someone to her quarters.

The doorbell to the room chimed. It seemed the person in question had finally arrived. Leyfa ordered Miya to retrieve them. After a few minutes of unclear chattering, Miya returned with the princess's special guest in tow.

“Too slow, Miya,” Leyfa scolded.

“Sorry, I couldn’t help it! I was just introducing myself and got all excited.”

“All I ordered you to do was answer the door and bring my guest to me. There was no need for you to introduce yourself and engage in idle banter.”

Leyfa’s newest pawn was incredibly powerful, but she was also incredibly hard to control. The princess racked her brain over what to do with her when the boy by her side spoke up...

“So, what’s up? Why was I summoned here? Is it because I helped Note escape last time?”

This was Courie Louison, genius mage and navigator for the Labyrinth Knights. He had the same Mapping skill as Note Athlon, but they each used it in completely different ways.

“I couldn’t help that, you know. I respect Note, so I had to help him out...even if it meant going against you, Princess.” Courie paused, then clapped his hand over his mouth. “Oh, I don’t mean I don’t respect *you*, Your Highness! I also admire you—I just admire Note more.”

His unconvincing excuses went in one ear and out the other. Leyfa clutched her head. First Miya, and now Courie. What was it about the people of this town that left them so void of decorum? While the princess wanted nothing more than to punish both of them for their insolence, she still needed them for other things. It was infuriating.

“I will overlook your assistance in Note Athlon’s escape,” she hissed.

“Oh, wow, thanks a lot! I was so nervous that you guys were gonna gang up on me and beat me to a pulp. Phew, what a relief!” Courie sighed with an expression that didn’t indicate any nerves whatsoever.

Leyfa ignored him and addressed her own business instead. “I expect something in return from you, however.”

“Something from me?”

“Yes. If you agree to it, not only will I forgive your disrespect...I’ll promise not to harm Note Athlon.”

With the Headhunter's sword hanging over her neck, the princess couldn't lay a finger on Note either way—but Courie didn't know that, and the princess had no qualms about using it as a bargaining chip. She was underhandedly taking advantage of Courie's devotion to Note, and he fell for it.

“Really?! If it's something I can do for you, I'd be happy to help!”

That was just the answer the princess had been hoping for. It was only a verbal agreement, but that was more than enough. Leyfa bit down on her lip to keep herself from grinning.

“It isn't a difficult task, and it won't cost you a thing,” she said. “I just want you to follow me somewhere.”

“If you're asking me to join your party, then I'm sorry, but I have the Labyrinth Knights.”

“I know that, of course. I just need to make use of your talents,” Leyfa said. “You'll be coming with me to the divine slate in the church.”

*

In this world, people were granted skills at their presentation ceremonies. By praying to God at a divine slate, the names and descriptions of their skills would appear on its stony surface. Divine slates existed all across the land, and in this particular country, they were kept under the protection of essential facilities such as churches.

As one of the larger towns in the nation, Puriff was no exception. A divine slate was housed within the local church. This was where Leyfa took Courie, accompanied by Gilbert and the woman she'd need to accomplish her plan. The four of them now stood before the divine slate.

The church had been notified of their arrival in advance. People normally only visited the divine slate alone. Groups were met with suspicion, as consulting the slate was considered a highly private activity, but the princess's position allowed them to enter the chamber containing the slate without argument.

Divine slates were mysterious artifacts that defied comprehension. Leyfa stood before this one and announced, “Listen up. All you have to do is stand in front of this slab and pray to it. Show us the description of the Mapping skill

—*that* is all I ask you to do. Well? Simple enough, isn't it?"

For someone who'd already acquired their skills, praying to the slate again would reveal their names and descriptions once more. This was what Leyfa pressed Courie to do.

"If that's really all, I don't mind..." Despite looking doubtful, Courie assumed a praying pose before the slate. Before it lit up with text, he raised his head. "Come to think of it, you were looking for a Mapping navigator for your dungeon party, weren't you?"

"That's right."

"That's why you kidnapped Note."

"I suppose that's the gist of it. But I told you already...if you do this for me, I won't ever lay a hand on him again."

"Don't you mean that you won't need to anymore?" Courie asked, turning away from the slate to face Leyfa. "Whether or not I accept your terms depends on if it's Copy or Capture."

"Tch..."

There, Leyfa realized the jig was up. This carefree boy hadn't shown any signs of suspicion, but Leyfa had read him wrong—he was smarter than he looked. He'd seen through her and predicted the worst possible outcome already. First Note, now Courie... There was no underestimating these Mapping users. It couldn't be an effect of the skill, Leyfa thought, but the coincidence almost made it feel like God had only given it to the most annoying people in the world.

"It's Copy," she answered with a sigh. "How did you figure out my plan?"

"It wasn't that hard to deduce." Courie raised his index finger. "You're currently in search of a Mapping user, and as far as I know, there are only two ways to get one." He raised a second finger and continued. "The first is to find a person with the Mapping skill. Your original plan was to use this method, as you went after Note. And the second," Courie said, waving his raised fingers in the air, "is to steal the skill from someone who possesses it. It isn't well known to the public, but there are skills that can do such a thing."

“I see. So it was a process of elimination.”

“Yup. And I happen to know the conditions required to steal a skill. You need to see its description upon the divine slate—that goes for both Copy and Capture.”

Copy was a skill that would recreate any skill reflected on the slate. Capture had a similar effect, but it stole the reflected skill from its owner. The key difference between them was exactly that—whether or not the original skillholder would lose their power.



Such skills might sound almighty, but they had their limits. Both Copy and Capture took up three slots, so their users were limited to copying or capturing a single skill. They were also only capable of copying or capturing skills up to the SR rarity. Between those two restrictions, neither Copy nor Capture was considered particularly useful. There were other skills like Full Copy and Full Capture that could take a target's entire skillset, and others yet that could only steal a single skill in the user's lifetime, but the particular variation that Leyfa had managed to get her hands on was simply Copy.

"This is Limuna Fornet, a Copy skillholder," she said, introducing the other woman she'd brought along. This was the princess's backup plan for failing to recruit Note Athlon—she'd used her authority to net an adventurer with Copy.

"Yup, yup, that's me! I'm everyone's idol, LimLim! Feel free to call me that too, pretty boy."

Leyfa watched the pink-haired girl wink flirtatiously at Courie. She fought to suppress the urge to smack Limuna upside the head. This girl was another problem child to Leyfa—she would have preferred to leave her out of the party altogether, but her failure to obtain Note had left her with no other choice. Reluctant as she was about it, the princess was not only forced to rely on Limuna...but also to treat her well. She couldn't afford to lose her.

"Sure, LimLim," said Courie.

"Whoa, you really called me by my nickname! I'm so happy! What's your name, pretty boy?"

"I'm Courie."

"Courie, huh? Cool name. Pleasure." Limuna grasped Courie's hand and shook it.

Leyfa cleared her throat as she watched them. "So, Courie Louison, what will you do? Do you accept my terms?"

"You have no trouble maintaining a serious attitude in this situation, huh?"

"Enough! I'm asking what you'll do!" Leyfa snapped at Courie's gibing.

His attitude was the very definition of insolence, but he continued without a

care, “Fine, I accept. But only if LimLim’s skill is actually Copy.”

“You don’t trust me?” the princess asked.

“If I do and she actually has Capture, I’m left without a skill.”

“I’m not a liar,” argued Limuna.

“Oh, I know. But even if you’re a good girl, there’s no telling if the princess is lying or not. I have to take into account that possibility,” Courie said, patting Limuna’s head.

She’d flirted with the first cute boy she saw, and Courie was laying it on just as thick. The sight of the two of them made Leyfa’s stomach turn, but she couldn’t let them get the better of her here.

She rubbed at her solar plexus to suppress a stomachache and said, “What will it take for you to believe me? Shall I write up a legally binding contract swearing it?”

“There’s no need for all that. It honestly wouldn’t make me feel better, and there’s a much simpler way,” Courie said, pointing to the divine slate. “Just have LimLim pray here.”

Copy

Rarity: SR (Super Rare)

Slot Cost: 3

Effect: Grants the ability to mimic a skill by seeing its effect text. There is no limit to the number of times Copy can be used, but no more than one skill may be copied at a time.

“So it really *is* Copy! Sorry for doubting you,” Courie apologized sincerely.

His reaction was unexpected enough to catch Leyfa off guard. He’d been most flippant so far, but he didn’t seem like a bad kid. That didn’t mean the princess would forgive his insolence, however.

“Are you satisfied now?” she asked.

“Yeah, I’ll be happy to show you mine now,” Courie agreed.

Leyfa was filled with relief. She was on the verge of finally completing her dungeon party. Courie immediately prayed to the divine slate, which began glowing with his skill description. Its bluish-white text reflected in Limuna’s eyes.

“Okay, copy complete! Now I can use the same skill as Courie!” she announced.

“Now that that’s done,” Courie stopped praying to ask, “why’d you do this in such a roundabout fashion?”

“Roundabout?” the princess asked, miffed.

“Yeah. If you’d just told me that you wanted to copy my skill, I gladly would’ve followed you here. What was the point in trying to hide Copy from me?”

“My Legion and the Labyrinth Knights are competing to conquer the dungeon first, no? You’ve no obligation to help a rival by allowing them to copy your skill. I certainly didn’t take you for the type.”

“You think I’m that spiteful?” Courie pointed to himself, aghast.

Leyfa shook her head. “Not you per se. I simply see no harm in assuming the worst about people.”

“Really? There are lots of people out there with bad intentions, sure, but I think it’s easier to look for the good in them.”

“I don’t need a conceited lecture from someone younger than me. What do *you* know about human nature?”

“I’m not trying to lecture you or anything. I’m just thinking out loud to myself. Feel free not to listen.” With that said, Courie turned away with a wave of his hand. “If that’s all you needed, I’ll be going now.”

“So be it. My business with you is done.”

“Then you have to keep your promise and stay away from Note from now on.”

“I know. I have nothing to gain from doing otherwise.”

“No, you don’t.”

While a burning desire for payback still smoldered within her, the threat of the Headhunter prevented her from acting upon it. In the end, the only one who benefited from the day’s deal was Leyfa. Courie had paid a price for nothing.

“I win this time...” Leyfa muttered as she watched him leave.

Now, finally, she could begin her dungeon conquest. And once she’d cleared the Dungeon of Puriff, the throne would be next. Nothing would stop her. She’d have her revenge on her father and older sisters yet. The very thought made her lips curl upward.

“I shall be the one who comes out on top. This world and all within it shall be mine.”

Before the slate of God, Leyfa Southerndall grinned wickedly to herself.

The New Arrivers

Now that Sofie had officially joined the party, the Arrivers resumed dungeon diving. The warp crystal could only take us as far as our party had been collectively, which meant clearing the early and middle floors again with Sofie. We'd taken care of floor 5 the other day on her trial run, so we'd be starting in earnest on floor 6. The Arrivers had already breached the end floors, however, so the early ones were like a joke to us these days. It was smooth sailing through floors 6 and onward, and we'd now successfully reached floor 11.

Floor 11 was an underground lake surrounded by caverns. This was also the beginning of the middle floors, meaning there was an exponential uptick in difficulty. The enemies from here on out would be putting up a real fight, so we took the opportunity to work on our formations with Sofie.

"Six Thrusts!" she called, leading the charge into a swarm of centipede monsters.

She took down the bug in front and then turned her attention to the right. The next centipede she aimed for spewed acid at her, but she evaded it by stooping low. She threw her rapier in an upward thrust, taking out the centipede just as another to her left swung its tail end at her in an attack. Sofie used her spirit magic to block the impact.

"Beacon— Oh, I don't need to pull aggro anymore. Silly me. Take this!" Roslia said, swinging the Holy Sword Fractus. Its shining blade gained unbelievable sharpness, slicing into the centipede monster. "Since I don't have to focus on defending, I'll put a little more magical energy into Fractus."

Since she had better defensive skills, Sofie was taking on the tanking role. In turn, Roslia would fight flexibly, switching back and forth between offense and defense as needed. She was currently working on familiarizing herself with the former, so she forsook her tanky ways in favor of all-out attacks.

"Here goes!"

As she shouted, Fractus increased in size. The shine of the blade and the magical energy flowing from it increased dramatically. The sword looked like a streak of light as it tore through the swarm, sending monster blood spraying everywhere.

“Knight’s Authority!”

Sofie used an aggro-grab art of her own to draw the centipedes’ attention. They wavered between Sofie and Roslia, unsure of who to attack—only to be mowed down by Fractus in their hesitation. Once the mobs were all cleaned up, we agreed to take a bit of a breather. Roslia kicked back, dismissing Fractus into thin air.

Sofie approached her and asked, “Do you have a minute?”

“Sure,” Roslia replied. “What’s up?”

“I’d like to go over our battle just now.”

“Ugh, but it just ended. Gimme a break.” Roslia brought her water flask to her mouth, her shoulders drooping.

Sofie continued in a matter-of-fact tone, “Got it. How many minutes do you need?”

“Can’t you wait until we’re back home? Talking about this stuff is so boring.”

“There’d be no meaning in that. I’d like to receive feedback immediately and make use of it in the next battle.”

There was one thing we’d learned about Sofie after she’d joined the party—she was *very* serious. She’d said she’d devote herself to dungeon conquest and, true to her word, she was giving everything her most sincere effort. She looked to every detail for ways to help the Arrivers.

“I’d appreciate it if you fought more offensively,” she informed Roslia.

“Ummm, I’m on my break here...”

“The faster the monsters are defeated, the easier it is for the person bearing the brunt of their attacks.”

“Are you listening to me?”

It was a shame her personality made her a bad match for Roslia, who was more of a free spirit. She hated anything stiff or stifling, while Sofie was stubborn about doing things properly. They were at odds even now.

“Is there anything you’d like me to work on based on this last battle?” Sofie asked.

“Nothing in particular...”

“That’s the most unconstructive feedback of all. Is there truly nothing you can think of?”

“I said nothing, and I meant it!”

“If you really didn’t notice anything this time, I’d like you to pay attention to that in the next fight.”

“If I had to pick something, I’d say you should fix your thickheadedness.”

“That has nothing to do with dungeon conquest.”

Sofie was so serious that Roslia’s snarky comments didn’t even register as snark to her. Realizing there was no other way to escape their conversation, Roslia sighed and retreated to where Erin and Neme were resting. Left alone, Sofie wiped the sweat on her brow with a towel. Her stoic expression revealed nothing of what she was thinking or feeling.

“What’s wrong, Note?” Force asked, walking over to me as I observed Sofie. “You’re staring at her an awful lot. She got your interest?”

“Yeah.”

“Whoa, really? I thought you’d go for Erin or Roslia, but Sofie’s your type, huh? No wonder you were so intent on her joining us.”

“What are you talking about? I’m worried she’s not fitting into the party well.”

What the hell was Force thinking? He cleared his throat and continued, “Then you shouldn’t’ve said that, man! You totally gave me the wrong idea.”

“Just so we’re clear, that was in no way my fault. You jumped to your own conclusions.”

“Anyway, you sure pay a lot of attention to that kind of thing, Note.”

“What kind of thing...?”

“The party getting along and whatnot.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah. You were worried about the same thing when Roslia joined up.”

“Now that you mention it, I guess you’re right.”

Roslia was one of us through and through now, but she hadn’t gotten on with the other Arrivers when she first joined. She’d tried to steal Force from the party, after all, so that blame really fell on her shoulders... But nevertheless, after getting a full dose of her and her carefree personality, she was part of the team before we knew it.

“Maybe it’s because of how hard things were for me when I first joined,” I mused.

“You mean you and Erin rubbing each other the wrong way? Hard to believe it now,” Force chuckled.

“I know, right?”

Erin hated my guts when I joined the Arrivers. She had her reasons and it was all in the past now, so it didn’t bother me anymore, but I could still recall how much it bothered me at the time. There was no denying that experience colored how I thought about the party dynamic now.

“If we’re going to challenge the dungeon as a team, isn’t it better for us all if we enjoy the ride together? The best scenario is to have no friction at all,” I explained to Force.

“I suppose that makes sense,” he replied with a nod.

“So how about it? Shall we go make friends with Sofie?”

“All right. I still haven’t talked to her properly, so now’s as good a chance as any.”

With Force’s approval, we made our way over to Sofie. She narrowed her eyes when she saw us approach and asked, “What is it? Do you need

something?”

“Not really. We just wanted to talk.”

“Do you have feedback about my fighting style?”

“Er, no. I was thinking something more casual than that.”

“I don’t need idle chatter. I’m ready to go as soon as the break is over.”

That was it. Our conversation lasted less than thirty seconds. It was over just as quickly as it began. It was only just now that I felt like I truly understood the importance of communication. Sure, maybe we’d been enemies in the past and it’d be hard for us to get along, but we were all on the same team now. We had a long road ahead of us, and it really wouldn’t kill Sofie to be a bit more social. I decided to try again.

“Don’t say that,” I began. “Everyone needs a break...”

“I know that. I’ll wait until the others are ready.”

“Then in the meantime, we could chat a little—”

“I’ll be waiting here, so you can chat with the others.”

“Okay...”

Once again, our conversation was aborted just like that.

“How much does she hate you, Note?” Force asked.

“I was wondering that myself. You didn’t have to say it out loud,” I shot back.

I couldn’t really blame Sofie, though. Although indirectly, I was the reason Leyfa had expelled her. I might hate me too if I were in her shoes—but I’d still talk to me, dang it! If she wanted to chew me out or something, I wished she wouldn’t hold back. Erin’s overly direct way of venting was a whole lot easier to deal with.

“You try talking to her, Force.” If she wasn’t going to talk to me, I figured he should give it a shot.

He thumped his chest proudly and declared, “You just leave it to me.”

“I said I don’t want to chat.”

Dude got shot down before the first word ever left his mouth. Even Force was shocked by such a shutdown. He stood there with a dumbfounded look on his face.



“I guess she hates you too, huh, Force?” I ribbed.

“Is that meant to be payback? You have a terrible personality.”

“I get that a lot.”

While we had our little back-and-forth, Sofie made no attempt to deny any of it. Her silence was starting to worry me for real. Did she seriously hate us?

“Hey, uh, Sofie... You can jump in any time and argue, you know?”

“About what?”

“How you hate us and stuff?”

“I am indebted to you. If you give me an order, I will fulfill it.”

“Could you not make it sound like I’m forcing you to do something against your will?”

That was a joke, right? I was really hoping it was a joke... My only fear was that Sofie didn’t actually know *how* to joke around.

“What?” she asked.

“It’s nothing...” I relented.

I was ready to drop the conversation altogether. There were things in this world that I was better off not knowing. Yup, ignorance is bliss. Still...I worried about how well Sofie would handle things from here.

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Upon joining the Arrivers, Sofie came to live at HQ with the rest of us. She had no home to return to after Leyfa kicked her out and we had more than enough room to spare, so we welcomed her. She didn’t have any particular objections either. Roughly a week had passed now since she’d moved in. I was a bit worried about her sociability and relationships with the rest of the party, but she was honest and always did her share of the chores, so there weren’t any major issues to speak of.

“Sofie, could you handle laundry duty for me today? I have something else to do,” Roslia pleaded, her palms pressed together in a begging gesture.

“I don’t mind,” Sofie agreed readily.

I watched this exchange and... “Hold on, Roslia.” I called for a time-out. “Isn’t this the fifth time you’ve talked Sofie into doing your chores?”

“Hmm? Whatever are you talking about?”

Roslia tried to feign ignorance, but the cute act she was putting on gave her away... She knew *exactly* what I was talking about.

“You were on laundry duty yesterday and bathroom cleaning duty the day before. Didn’t you leave those to Sofie too?”

“Oh, now that you mention it...”

“You said you had something to do and left it all to her.”

“I really did have something to do though!”

“And what is it today?”

“...Take a nap?”

“Oh, come on.”

The whole world knew that “taking a nap” didn’t qualify as “having something to do.” She was clearly just trying to shirk her chores. That said, it really seemed like Roslia had gotten a handle on the stubborn Sofie. It was hard to believe that she’d nearly been at her wit’s end in the dungeon the other day. She was expertly leading the hardworking knight by the nose now.

“Sofie, you need to say no when she does this,” I told her.

“I don’t mind helping out. I want to be useful to someone,” she replied.

“See? She says she’s happy to help out,” Roslia cut in.

“Sure, she says that, but...”

“Listen, Sofie gets to help out and I get to take it easy. It’s win-win.”

“Sofie, you’re just feeding into Roslia’s ego if you do everything she tells you to.”

She’d been pampered like a princess in all her previous parties, so she was no stranger to walking all over people. She’d met her match with the Arrivers,

however. With the exception of the old Force, no one here was docile enough to act at her beck and call...so it had never been a problem until now. Sofie was a loyal, obedient knight whose work ethic had her scolding Roslia in the dungeon but bending to her will at home.

“I really don’t mind,” Sofie insisted. “I’m free anyway.”

“See, Note? See?”

Perhaps Sofie and Roslia weren’t good for each other... The steadfast knight had basically found herself a new Tyrant Princess. This whole setup wasn’t much different than when she was with Leyfa, was it?

“Are you sure? Roslia’s just going to nap, you know?” I had to ask.

“I’ve said it several times already, but I don’t mind,” Sofie continued to insist.

“Wouldn’t it be better for you to nap instead?”

“I don’t need to nap. I wouldn’t be able to sleep tonight if I did.”

“Hmm...”

She was so indifferent when she said it that I almost missed that little tidbit—Sofie couldn’t sleep at night if she napped. Which was relatable, of course. I was just a little surprised. She didn’t seem like the type to admit to something like that. I had to stifle a chuckle.

“What are you grinning about?” Roslia inquired, peering at me curiously.

“Nothing,” I replied, clearing my throat and brushing her off.

She then turned her attention back to Sofie and asked, “Oh, that’s right. If you’re free, could you do one more thing for me?”

“Anything,” Sofie replied readily.

“Don’t say yes before you know what it is.” I tried warning her, but she didn’t seem to be listening.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Could you make my bed before I take my nap?”

“Come on, Roslia, that’s going too far...” I sighed.

“Consider it done,” Sofie said.

“She even agreed to *that*?” Who needed their bed made before a nap, anyway? Roslia really was acting like a princess right now. “And you’re okay with this, Sofie?”

“Don’t worry. I’m good at making beds.”

“That’s not what I mean...”

“You’ll sleep soundly, guaranteed.”

Huh, that did sound pretty good. Maybe I’d ask her to make mine too... Wait, no! I was supposed to be stopping her right now!

I shook my head to get a hold of myself, only to see the two girls already headed upstairs to Roslia’s room. Sofie was seriously going to make her bed for her, wasn’t she? I’d failed at intervening yet again. I was glad they were getting along now, but I had my doubts about this arrangement. They weren’t exactly friends... They were more like master and servant.

Sofie returned ten minutes later. Roslia was probably snoring away by now. I felt the need to tell Sofie not to spoil her too much, but just as I approached her and opened my mouth...

“Sofie, Sofie! Make some dessert!” Neme called out.

“Not you too!” I shouted, throwing a swift chop as she came running over.

She rubbed her head, blinking in surprise, and demanded, “What are you doing?!”

“I should be asking you that. Why are you ordering Sofie to make dessert for you?”

“Because Sofie makes yummy desserts!”

That wasn’t what I was asking about! But Sofie made good desserts, huh? I’d had no idea. I wouldn’t have minded tasting them myself... Wait, no! I was supposed to be scolding Neme right now!

“Neme, you shouldn’t order Sofie around like that,” I informed her.

“Would you like apple pie or chiffon cake?” Sofie asked.

“Sofie, please don’t skip straight to taking her order,” I begged. Seriously, why was she agreeing to absolutely everything? She needed to learn to say no.

“Neme wants apple pie!”

“All right. I’ll get to it immediately.”

“Hold on a minute!” I stuck out both hands and called for them to halt.

“Neme, Sofie’s tired from waiting on Roslia earlier. Let’s let her rest a bit.”

“I’m not tired. It’s fine.”

“You heard her, Note.”

“What?” Forget grateful, Sofie wasn’t even *cooperating* when I tried to stand up for her. Was it possible that I was in the wrong here? “Even so, Neme, please stop asking her to do so much. Sofie’s just going to tire herself out this way, and there’s nothing in it for her.”

“She gets to feed Neme dessert, and Neme gets to eat dessert! It’s win-win!”

This again! I could hardly see the “win” in it for Sofie. What part of feeding someone else dessert qualified as winning?

“Is that the buzzword of the day or something?” I had to ask.

“Roslia taught it to me!”

“So she’s the culprit...” I wanted to hold my head in my hands. Why’d Roslia have to go and teach simple-minded Neme how to abuse Sofie too? “In any case, you should treat Sofie with a little more appreciation! No apple pie for you!”

“But—”

“No buts.”

“Sofie’s already cutting the apples.”

I turned to the kitchen to see Sofie, indeed, already chopping up apples. Did she have to go and do that the second I’d looked away?

“If she stops now, it’ll be a waste of apples, Note.”

“You’re right,” I sighed. I had to admit defeat and shift gears. Now that Sofie

was already making apple pie anyway... “Could I get some too?”

“Of course,” Sofie replied, nodding as she chopped away.

If she and Neme had gotten closer, maybe it wasn’t all bad. It was hard to say they were friends, though. They were more like mother and daughter.

“Yay!” Neme cheered in delight.

I gave her celebration a sidelong glance before turning to Sofie. “In exchange, we’ll do the laundry Roslia forced on you,” I offered.

“I can do it myself. It’s fine.”

“Don’t say that.” I couldn’t let her take on the burden of both chores, so I grabbed one of Neme’s still-raised arms. “Come on. We’re going to do the laundry.”

“Huh?! Neme too?!”

“Of course! She’s making a pie for you!”

“Why does Neme have to do the laundry?”

There was only one response I could think of: “Neme gets pie baked for her, and Sofie gets the laundry done for her. Win-win, right?”

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“Do you think it’s okay, Note?” Erin asked as we stood in the kitchen making dinner that night.

What was she referring to? I was so absorbed in cleaning the frying pan that I’d missed the lead-up myself.

“Do I think what’s okay?” I asked.

“I’m talking about Sofie!”

Erin realized I hadn’t been listening and snapped at me. But she wasn’t seriously angry, so I urged her to continue. “What’s wrong with Sofie?”

“Roslia and Neme are basically taking advantage of her, you know?”

“Ah, that.” Turned out that I knew *exactly* what she was talking about. Whether it was Roslia and her chores or Neme and her desserts, they were

asking way too much of Sofie. “Actually, it’s been bothering me too.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Roslia and Neme are going overboard. Sofie’s a newbie, so she probably doesn’t feel like she can refuse them. And they’re milking her for it...”

Erin’s long pigtails trembled as she shook with rage. It was true that the other girls were relying too much on Sofie. And since she never refused them, their demands were growing more selfish by the day.

“I wish they’d show a little restraint,” I sighed.

“You’re telling me.”

“Still, I have to say that I’m a little surprised. I didn’t think you’d get angry on Sofie’s behalf, Erin.”

“Huh? Really?”

“Well, you were against her joining the party.” Erin had been the lone remaining holdout vote against Sofie in the end, so I found it curious that she was taking her side now.

“I’m not heartless! Now that she’s one of us, I’m obviously going to treat her like it.”

“Erin...”

“I still regret how I treated you when you first joined, so I’m trying to be nice to her.”

I hadn’t expected her to feel this way. She really had mellowed out. Back when we first met, I never would’ve thought she’d mature like this...but the change warmed my heart.

“What do you think we should do? Would it be best to say something to Roslia and Neme?” Erin paused while stirring the pot to ask.

Would it? Scolding the two of them might temporarily make them reflect on their actions, but it wouldn’t really fix the problem. The root cause lay elsewhere.

“If anything, shouldn’t we say something to Sofie?”

“Why?”

“Roslia and Neme don’t mean any harm by asking her to do stuff. I think the real issue is why she keeps saying yes to it all.”

“It’s true that she never bats an eye. I would’ve snapped ages ago in her position.”

“I can imagine that...”

“Let’s go talk to her right now.”

With that, Erin cut the heat on the stove and went to find Sofie. I didn’t think it was urgent enough to stop cooking, but I had to admire her gumption. I placed the frying pan I finished washing on the drying rack and stirred the pot that was still simmering on the stove in the time it took Erin to return with Sofie in tow.

“What did you want to talk about?” Sofie looked between Erin and me, puzzled by the situation.

Erin was the one to answer her. “What do you think?”

“Did I...do something wrong?”

“That’s not what this is!”

With the way Erin had dragged her in for an interrogation, I wasn’t really surprised that Sofie thought she’d done something wrong. Nevertheless, I decided to leave this to Erin. I checked the simmering potatoes in the pot while listening in on their conversation.

“What do you have to say for yourself?” Erin asked.

“Understood. Is this because I didn’t help with dinner?” Sofie asked in turn.

“No! *That’s* exactly what I’m talking about!”

“All right, I’ll go wash my hands now. Just give me a minute.”

“No, I *don’t* want you to help!”

“What does that mean...?”

Frustrated by their misaligned conversation, I interrupted. "Erin wants to talk to you about something. She's concerned about how you always do whatever you're told."

"What?"

"Like doing chores for Roslia or making dessert for Neme."

"Should I not do those things?" Sofie stood there in vacant surprise. It was like she didn't see the problem.

"I'm just saying you shouldn't feel like you *have* to do them. It's okay to say no," Erin explained, crossing her arms.

However, Sofie's expression didn't change at all. "But I want to do them..."

"You like having chores forced on you?"

"Yes. I don't have anything else to do anyway, so I'd rather be useful."

"Seriously...?" That was something Erin hadn't considered before, it seemed. She was visibly shaken by Sofie's reply. "You don't have to overwork yourself, you know?"

"I don't feel like I am."

"I see..."

An awkward silence dominated the room. Although Erin had pulled Sofie aside out of consideration, it hadn't really come off that way. Sofie wasn't one to read between the lines either, so she didn't understand what Erin was getting at. It was like they were on completely different wavelengths. Erin really was worried about Sofie, though. If only there was a way to get that across...

"Then is there anything you're unhappy about here in the Arrivers?" Erin asked, unable to bear the silence any longer.

"Not particularly," Sofie reported shortly.

"No? There has to be something. Anything."

"I receive fewer orders here than I did when I served Princess Leyfa."

"Of course you do! Don't compare us to her!"

“Are you bad-mouthing Her Highness?”

“Er, I, uh... I just mean there’s no point in comparing life as the princess’s knight to life in a dungeon party. Yeah...”

“I see. I’m grateful you took me in, but I will not brook contempt for Her Highness.”

“Yeah, sorry...” Erin said, ducking her head.

They still weren’t on the same page at all. Erin needed to watch what she said, and Sofie needed to listen better. But those problems were part of their personalities, and they certainly weren’t flaws that could be fixed overnight. I decided not to say anything in that regard.

“Is there really nothing, though? That you’re unhappy about, I mean.” Once again, Erin was the first to break the awkward silence. “We live together now, so there has to be something, right? Something that bothers you.”

“Something that bothers me...?”

“Yeah. If there’s anything I can do, just say the word.”

“There may be one thing.”

I reflexively stopped stirring the potatoes when I heard that curious statement and looked up.

“Who was it?” Erin demanded. “Roslia? Neme? I’ll go teach them a lesson!”

“Not them.”

“Then who?!”

“Note.”

Of all people, it was me? Erin whipped around to glare at me with her ruby-colored eyes. “What did you do?”

“Nothing that I can recall...”

“Don’t tell me you made some lewd demands of Sofie, knowing she wouldn’t refuse!”

“I wouldn’t do something like that!”

What a baseless accusation! I turned to Sofie in a fluster, but...

"I've been wondering why you wanted me to join the party, but now I finally understand. You were after my body."

"Please don't jump to your own strange conclusions!"

"I am indebted to you, Note. I'd rather die than do such things with you, but I have no choice if it's an order. I can only obey."

"Don't obey orders like that!"

I had surpassed the point of exasperation with Sofie's resigned acceptance of everything. I was getting downright scared. Honestly, it was a relief that Force had turned over a new leaf. Who knew what the old Force might've asked Sofie to do? With how seriously she went about everything, she might have taken one of his jokes literally. If he hadn't shaped up into a decent guy, the Arrivers' morals would be hitting rock bottom right about now.

"But you'd rather die, huh...?"

I almost ignored that part, but it was a particularly harsh choice of words. She'd rather die? Really? It wasn't like I was interested in Sofie that way. I had absolutely no investment in that kind of relationship with her, but that was still hard to hear from a girl...

"Don't worry. I believe I have fewer reservations about death than most. It's just a measure of how much I'd hate it," she assured me.

"That doesn't make me feel any better." It was just a different way of saying she hated the very thought. I wouldn't have any HP left if this conversation continued, so I returned to the topic at hand. "So, what's the problem you had with me?"

Despite standing right in front of me, the object of her complaint, Sofie spoke without hesitation. "The way you treat me," she said.

"Huh?"

"We're party members now, and the same age at that. There's no reason for you to continue to regard me like a guest."

"Wait, we're the same age?!" Rather than her complaint, I was more taken

aback by that bombshell.

“You’re eighteen, no?”

“I am... How did you know that?”

“I investigated you under Princess Leyfa’s orders.”

I understood what she was saying, but I was still having trouble processing it. It made perfect sense to investigate your enemies, though... I’d done the same thing when I called on Hugel and Eisha, so I couldn’t really say anything about that part.

“That means we’re the same age too,” piped up Erin.

“Truly?” asked Sofie.

“Well, I’m the same age as Note, after all.”

Huh. Apparently the princess hadn’t investigated Erin in as much detail. It was now Sofie’s turn to look surprised.

“That means the three of us are the same age,” I muttered.

“So it seems. All the more reason not to be formal with me, Note,” Sofie replied.

“Yeah, okay...”

In that case, I’d stop treating Sofie like a guest at HQ from now on. I guess I’d been minding my manners around her since I first met as the princess’s envoy. But she was right. There was no need for that anymore. Still, I’d never thought someone who threatened me over being disrespectful with the princess would tell me to be *less* respectful of them... Perhaps Sofie had changed some since joining the party. Maybe this was proof she was slowly getting closer to us in her own way.

“I gotta say that I’m surprised,” I confessed. “I didn’t think that would be your problem with me.”

“Really?”

“I thought you wanted to keep your distance from me.”

“I’m not asking to be friends,” she said bluntly. “I just don’t think excess

formality is appropriate given our relationship and ages. You're technically my employer here, so if anything, I should be the one deferring to you."

Yeah, that response was completely out of the realm of my expectations... She hadn't really changed at all. She was still operating like she had under Leyfa. She still diminished herself in service to someone else. Nothing was different.

"Nah, you don't have to do that," I insisted.

Sofie would need a bit more time to integrate with the Arrivers. That was the impression I walked away with from this conversation.

The Steady Advance of the Princess's Legion

The Princess's Legion, led by Leyfa Southerndall herself, was currently in the midst of challenging floor 18. It had only been two short months since the party first began dungeon diving together, yet they'd already reached the latter half of the middle floors. Their progress was exceptionally smooth for dungeoneers.

One of the reasons for this was the high combat ability of each individual party member. And their front line was currently being held by two of their best, renowned war priest Gilbert Einzach and ace brawler Onz Gregory.

"Hah!" Gilbert swung his mace imbued with holy power. The orc he was fighting, which was several times the size of any man, went flying.

"Stop knocking 'em all over the dang place, man," Onz complained, kicking off of a thick tree to leap into the air. Its trunk snapped under the force of his kick, and Onz's momentous leap shot him behind the flying orc. "Here's the finisher!"

Onz linked his hands together and slammed them into the orc's back, sending it hurtling back down to the ground. The resulting impact turned the monster into mincemeat. The giant monsters running rampant on floor 16 were completely overwhelmed with brute force alone.

"That's one down!"

Waiting behind Onz as he brushed off his hands were his teammates Mille Gundak and Miya Line. He walked away from them as giant beasts closed in on the women. Mille raised her hand and swung it down.

"Magic Sword Dance, Expanded Form! Sixth Sword: Conviction Blade!"

A giant blade suddenly appeared in the air, moving along with the trajectory of Mille's hand. Rather than cutting her opponents down, it was more like she was smashing them. Beast after beast was flattened under her blade, smearing the ground with flesh and blood.

"I want a turn too!" called a carefree voice. Following that was the sound of a creaking bow. Miya held it high, the string pulled back as far as it could go.

“Dreadnaught Flash!”

An arrow shot forward like a bolt of light. It sailed through the air, boring a wide hole through everything in its path...including the trees and the ground.

“Looks like that’s all for the time being,” Leyfa murmured, her arms crossed in boredom.

As she said, their party had now cleared out all the monsters in the immediate area. They’d already defeated the mid-boss as well, so all that remained was to defeat the boss and move on to the next floor.

Leyfa turned to Limuna, who was standing beside her, and asked, “Is there still no sign of the boss chamber?”

“Hmm... LimLim’s doing her best too... But she just can’t find it!”

“I can understand if you haven’t found the chamber yet, but stop referring to yourself in that ridiculous manner.”

“That’s so mean! LimLim’s just speaking normally. How could you say that’s ridiculous? You’re gonna make LimLim cry...”

“Enough. Just stop talking altogether.”

Leyfa brushed Limuna off and sighed. The princess was accustomed to her navigator’s obnoxious behavior, but she was particularly fed up with it today, for they were struggling to find the boss chamber.

This was the Princess’s Legion’s third day on floor 18. They’d subjugated the mid-boss on their second, so they’d believed this floor would go as smoothly as all the others...until a whole day had now transpired without any notable progress. It wasn’t as though they were having trouble against the monsters. For an all-star party gathered from around the country, the enemies on floor 18 weren’t much of a fight. They’d simply failed to find the boss, and tracking it down was growing more and more time-consuming.

The Mapping skill allowed its holder to mentally see a radius of one kilometer around them, meaning the party wouldn’t find the boss room until they got their navigator within a kilometer of it. A thief like Note Athlon could detect monster presences at greater distances, allowing him to pinpoint bosses with

ease. But Limuna was still in the process of learning enemy detection arts. One of her strengths was the variety of arts she'd picked up via the use of her Copy skill, but the circumstances would have made a well-trained navigator like Note all the more desirable. Leyfa chewed at her nails in frustration.

The first to call out to her was Gilbert. "Now, now, young miss. There's no need to be impatient," he said.

"You want me to be *patient* in this situation? While we're at a standstill here, Sofie's party is making plenty of headway."

The fact that Sofie had joined up with Note was another source of irritation for the princess. Having gotten fed up with Sofie's ineptness, Leyfa had personally dismissed her from the Legion. If, after all that, Sofie managed to clear the dungeon first, Leyfa would be a laughingstock. It would mean her judgment had been wrong. And for someone as proud as the Tyrant Princess, being undermined like that was her worst nightmare.

"Even after getting rid of her, she manages to be a thorn in my side. How utterly worthless!" she hissed with a terrifying look on her face.

She was clearly enraged, but Gilbert was an older gentleman seasoned by a thousand battles. He calmly assessed the situation for her. "Sofie's new team may indeed surpass us in terms of floor count, but no party has ever cleared the dungeon. Not even the Arrivers will be able to do it easily."

"But—"

"In fact, the Arrivers have failed once before and it cost them one of their own. Dungeon conquest isn't a matter of who's in the lead, but who survives until the end."

"I don't like the crotchety slow-and-steady approach, but I gotta agree with the old man there," interjected Onz. He had his arms folded behind his head and sounded rather unconcerned. "I've thrown down with all kinds of opponents in my day, but this dungeon is something else entirely. The enemies here aren't chumps. We gotta strap in here for the long haul."

"This from the man who's stood against an entire country? Sounds like you've lost your backbone," Leyfa sneered.

“A country’s nothing but a bunch of people in the end. A gaggle of weaklings ain’t much of a threat, but this place is different. You’re fighting against things that aren’t human. There’s no easy way of settling this battle,” replied Onz, casually dismissing the princess’s ridicule. “If we really can’t find the boss on our own, how about we head back to town and ask that Note guy where the chamber is? The Arrivers have cleared this floor before, right? It’d sure save us the trouble. Let’s take it easy where we can.”

“Absolutely not! I’d rather die than ask for Note Athlon’s help!”

“Whoa, no need to get so mad. It’s not like he’s our only option. Sofie’s one of ‘em too now, yeah? And she’d do anything you asked, wouldn’t she?”

“I’m the one who drove her out. There’s no way she’d listen to me.”

“You think so? I bet she still idolizes you even now.”

“Even if that were true, she doesn’t stand to gain anything from assisting me.”

“Dangle some bait, then. Like, ‘If you listen to me, I’ll make you a knight again.’”

“I have no intention of giving her another chance.”

“It’s just pretext. You can promise her whatever you want, then break the promise. Do whatever it takes, y’know? That’s my motto.”

“Regardless, I have no intention of relying on Note or Sofie this time. This is my party, and I won’t hear any objections.”

As birds of a wicked feather, Leyfa understood where Onz was coming from. She, too, believed in using everything at her disposal, but that was where their ideologies diverged. To Leyfa, “doing whatever it takes” meant being as ruthless and as cutthroat as necessary, *not* that she was literally willing to do anything. For example, if she could get her way by kowtowing to someone else, she’d never do it. Leyfa was proud. And regardless of the consequences, she’d stand by that—like when it came to kidnapping someone to “persuade” them.

Onz, meanwhile, was a man of a different strategy. He believed in efficiency and practicality. He didn’t give a damn about pride in the face of getting what he wanted. He’d happily lower himself to get his way. Evil was something Leyfa

was willing to resort to for the sake of her ambitions, but it was merely another tool to Onz. That was the difference between them. His ways were wretched and vulgar, unlike the lofty princess's.

While she was mulling over her disdain for him, another party member breezily called out to her, "Hey, Leyfie, can I say something?"

"No. Die."

"Why are you so mean?!" pleaded the teary-eyed new recruit, Miya Line. "How can you treat me like that?!"

The fact that she was Note Athlon's childhood friend infuriated the princess, but what infuriated her even more was the half-elf's cavalier attitude. Worse yet, Miya was completely oblivious to this. She was positively beyond redemption. If any of the princess's other retainers dared to call her something as disrespectful as "Leyfie," she would have them executed on the spot. How many times had she gritted her teeth in frustration, unable to get rid of this pesky half-elf because of her peerless prowess?

"Just stop calling me that," Leyfa insisted.

"Aww, but it's so cute!"

"I have no interest in cuteness." No matter how many times the princess warned her, Miya continued to address her that way. Firmly scolding her did nothing, so Leyfa abandoned the matter and returned to the business at hand. "So, what did you want? Or were you shouting at me for no reason?"

"It's about this floor..." Miya scanned the vast mountain range that extended behind the giant forest. "Could the next floor be past those peaks after all?"

"I told you that I didn't want to consider that possibility for now," Leyfa said, quickly shooting her down.

Miya had suggested as much earlier, and based on the direction of the mountains, it seemed there was a fair chance that she was right. Crossing the mountains, however, would take several days. And if Miya turned out to be wrong, it would take twice as long to get back with nothing to show for the journey. It wasn't a simple matter to just go and check, which was why Leyfa had decided to eliminate all other possibilities first.

“That said, wasting time here *would* be quite annoying if the next floor is yonder...” she muttered.

Leyfa was worried that Miya was actually right. And if that was the case, the longer they spent on this side of the mountains, the more time they’d waste on this floor. It would mean their best course of action now was to head for the range immediately. In other words, the party had two possible objectives to pursue—minimum risk or maximum return. It was time for their leader to act like a sovereign and make a decision.

“Fine. Let’s try crossing the mountains.”

In the end, Leyfa was prepared to take the higher risk option. Not because she was influenced by Miya’s opinion, of course. There was just no end to searching the easy way. So rather than keeping at it, she believed that making a different play had a chance of yielding a different result.

The half-elf in question, however, was none the wiser to the princess’s rationale. She puffed her chest out proudly. “See? I said something good, didn’t I?”

In her irritation, words spilled from Leyfa’s mouth of their own accord. “If the boss chamber isn’t on the other side of these mountains, I’ll have you beheaded.”

“What?!”

Steel yourself thus before speaking to me, Leyfa mused internally.

*

Half a day after they decided to cross the mountain range, Leyfa’s party was about to learn that they’d made the correct call.

“What is this? A wall?” Miya asked, running right up to it.

Indeed, they’d encountered a pure white wall while cutting through the edge of the forest. It was clearly out of place among the overgrown greenery, and it stood about two meters tall—much shorter than the surrounding trees. It would be easy enough to get over.

“What’s on the other side?” Leyfa asked Limuna, their navigator.

Limuna scratched at her cheek and answered in an infuriatingly cute voice, “LimLim doesn’t know! Mapping only shows the wall stretching on forever.”

“I see...”

Leyfa swiftly turned away from Limuna and pondered the situation. This wall hadn’t been made by adventurers, nor was it something created by monsters. It was part of the floor—part of the dungeon—and it had a purpose. It was here for a reason.

“Let’s cross it and see what happens,” she decided.

They’d need to move past the wall in order to reach the mountains beyond the forest. Their only option was keep moving, but what lay past it was a complete unknown. To play things safe, they’d have to proceed with caution.

“Miya.”

“Yeah?”

“You go over first and scout things out.”

“Roger that!”

Miya was a hunter, a battle style that specialized in skirmishing with monsters. Like thieves, hunters made good scouts thanks to the search-type arts at their disposal. Limuna had lots of combat arts under her belt, but she was still learning detection arts. She couldn’t yet fill the role Note Athlon would for the Princess’s Legion, so Miya lent a hand when it came to reconnaissance.

“Hup!”

Thanks to her Major Physical Boost skill, she was capable of athletic feats far more impressive than the average person. She deftly hopped up to the top of the wall.

“Well? What’s the other side like?” Leyfa asked impatiently.

“It looks the same.” Miya scanned the area, then leaped down without hesitation. “Yeah, I dunno. There wasn’t anything—”

She was interrupted when she hit the ground and the earth below began rumbling and rupturing. Leyfa lowered her center of balance, somehow

managing to remain on her feet.

“An earthquake?”

No sooner had she said those words than she realized how wrong she was. This was the dungeon. A world wholly unlike the surface. There were no tectonic plates here to cause earthquakes. In other words, it could only be one thing.

“The boss...” Leyfa murmured, overwhelmed by the sight of the mountains moving before her.

Then a chasm opened—no, a maw. But she didn’t realize that until it roared. Everything on floor 18 was big. The monsters were, of course, but so too were the plants and landforms. This floor was on a completely different scale than the surface world. The orc mid-boss they’d fought previously was hulking for a humanoid monster, but who could’ve predicted a mountain-sized terror? Even Leyfa was intimidated by its sheer size.

“So the wall was the boundary to the boss chamber...”

She finally understood the purpose of the wall, but it was too late. She and her party were completely caught off guard. Now they’d have to face the boss unprepared.

“What do we do...?”

While Leyfa was questioning herself, Onz made the first move. He assumed a fighting posture...then smashed in the wall with his fist.

“What are you doing?!” Leyfa exclaimed.

“Isn’t it obvious? I’m clearing the obstruction. Now we can get to the boss and fight it, yeah?”

He was right. They’d already awoken the boss. They had no recourse but to slay it. Leyfa pulled herself together and began issuing orders.

“All right. Pull back, Miya. Gilbert will tank this one. Onz and Miya, I want you two to focus your firepower on offense. Mille and I will support you.”

“What should LimLim do?”

“Your abilities won’t be worth much against this opponent. Focus on staying alive.”

“Got it! I’ll do my best to run away.”

Limuna was a jack-of-all-trades adventurer without any real specialization. She knew lots of different arts thanks to the roles she’d taken on with copied skills in the past, but not many had good synergy with Mapping. Compared to the other party members, her usefulness in combat just didn’t measure up. She’d be in a bad way against a colossal opponent like this.

The mountain was already taking the shape of a dragon. Craggy fangs and sharp eyes appeared from the slope, and the peak formed its back. The long ridge was its tail, which it used to slam the ground.

“Let’s get to work, shall we?”

At Leyfa’s signal, Gilbert soldiered forward. He used an aggro-grab art to get the dragon’s attention as he moved toward its head. Meanwhile, Onz headed around toward its tail. Miya remained in place and drew an arrow from her quiver.

Meanwhile, Leyfa reached into the item bag hidden on the right side of her belt and withdrew what looked like an ornamental flute. Her skill was common among adventurers. It was a simple one that increased performance and proficiency with artifacts, Magic Item Specialist. This common, simple skill, however, was especially potent in the hands of someone as powerful and wealthy as Leyfa. With the resources to obtain whatever magic item she wanted, not to mention free rein of the royal treasury, it was overpowered.

Leyfa blew the flute, and her party members were instantly enveloped by a green aura. Her flute was a type of magic item that buffed anyone who heard it played. Once Leyfa had used it, she stowed it away and took out a cross-shaped shield. When she poured her magical energy into it, it expanded and emitted a green mist in a dome shape.

“Hmph!”

About then, a white pillar of light rose from within the forest. It wasn’t from one of Leyfa’s items; it was a pillar of holy power released by Gilbert. He was a

war priest who fought with a combination of spells, arts, and his impressive physique. He'd imbued his mace with holy power to launch the opening attack.

"Hammer of Judgment."

With a tremendous roar, the area filled with light. His mace met the great dragon's face, and the resulting explosion was several times louder than the creature's roar. Its deafening echo marked the true start of the battle.

"Let's go! Dreadnaught Flash!"

Miya fired a powerful shot by pulling her bowstring to the limit. Onz climbed up on the dragon's back, striking it with all his might. Yet still, the dragon was fixated on Gilbert. It paid the other two attacks no mind as it released an earth-searing beam of light from its mouth.

"Guardian's Protection. Inviolable Sanctuary."

Gilbert activated a defense buff and a defensive area-of-effect spell before taking the beam head-on. When it subsided, he was left standing in place perfectly unharmed. He then landed another hit of Hammer of Judgment while the dragon was vulnerable after attacking.

"It's a tough opponent..."

Leyfa was surprised by how feisty the dragon remained after taking two hits from Gilbert. Hammer of Judgment was an advanced war priest art, and a heavy-hitting one at that. It could devastate single targets, but it was especially strong in the hands of someone as experienced as Gilbert. His Hammer of Judgment was more like a bomb. Perfectly honed strength and intense holy power normally came together to deadly effect at his command.

But Miya's high-powered bow art Dreadnaught Flash wasn't doing much damage either, and Onz's punches were doing even less. As Leyfa feared, the dragon's defenses were indeed tough. Gilbert had extraordinary stamina and endurance to match, however, so the party wasn't in any imminent danger. Nevertheless, no one wanted to get drawn into a protracted battle here on floor 18. And to that end, Leyfa decided to take a risk.

"Onz, get away from the dragon's back," she called as she retrieved yet another item from her bag. This one was a decorative scarlet cannon—the

highest firepower weapon in her arsenal. “I suppose I should stop being so frugal with the ammunition.”

Clutched in one hand, Leyfa was also holding a purple stone the size of her fist, for this was no ordinary cannon. It was a deadly enchanted weapon that used magic gems as shells. The power of its attacks was proportionate to the gem fired. The cannon took time to aim and shoot, making it difficult to use and rather impractical for war on the surface, but it was wonderfully effective against big, slow monsters.

In other words, it was perfect for fighting a giant dragon. Leyfa wasn't sure she'd ever have such a perfect chance to use the scarlet cannon again. She'd come prepared with a variety of valuable magic gems to fire, and she deemed this fight to be worthy of the cost. In the worst-case scenario, she could restock on the surface after the fact. What she cared about most right now was quickly progressing through the dungeon.

“Opening fire!”

Leyfa swiftly began shooting, launching one gem and then loading the next, grabbed at random from her magic item pouch. The giant dragon howled in pain. Not even it could withstand the rain of magical cannon fire. Leyfa's bombardment was powerful enough to alter the landscape. She could have blasted away even a real mountain range.

“Princess, incoming!” Gilbert warned.

But Leyfa was prepared for this. “Miya, Mille, Limuna. Focus on protecting your own lives. Don't worry about me,” she ordered.

She adjusted her grip on the cross-shaped shield she'd equipped earlier. A beam of light from the dragon's maw was barreling toward her.

“Protect me, Schildlicht,” she called.

In response, the left arm of the cross stopped glowing and the mist surrounding Leyfa strengthened in intensity. The dragon's beam struck her dome-shaped barrier and bounced off, burning down a stretch of forest in its wake.

“Three stacks left...”

Schildlicht was an enchanted shield that could create a barrier of light energy. In its default state, it would deflect all attacks under a certain strength threshold. But by expending the stacks displayed on the glowing cross, it could also block extremely powerful attacks up to four times—once for each arm. Leyfa was also in possession of a bracelet with a substitution effect that would save her from death, albeit only once, so she was actually capable of withstanding more than four hits from the dragon. She had no intention of letting it come to that, however. She could replenish Schildlicht's stacks outside of the dungeon, but her substitution bracelet was a one-time use item. There was no way she'd waste such a precious artifact on floor 18.



Gilbert realized Leyfa meant to use up her shield, and thus tried to get the dragon's attention again while she reloaded her cannon. "Hammer of Judgment."

Just as the dragon's next beam was about to hit the princess—"Magic Sword Dance, Expanded Form! Second Sword: Azure Sky Blade!" Mille jumped in to provide backup. An army of swords danced through the air to block the beam.

"Mille!" Leyfa called out. The unexpected show of support put a smile on the princess's face. She'd ordered Mille to focus on saving her own skin, so this was a pleasant deviation from the plan.

"I can help too! I won't be known as the weakest sage forever!" Mille called in return.

Following that, Leyfa expended another stack of her shield to block a tail swipe from the dragon. Gilbert was then able to regain aggro and allow the princess to catch her breath. All this time, Onz had continued his relentless assault, and it was finally paying off. The dragon's right foot ceased moving. Onz had crushed it with his bare fists.

The mountainous beast roared toward the sky as its back started glowing red—it was going to erupt. Its rage had triggered a volcanic blast. Lava and rocks sprayed into the air. Things were looking grim. Schildlicht's regular barrier couldn't protect against an attack of this magnitude. Leyfa wouldn't have time to load, aim, and fire a gem either.

"Esmeralda-Agua-Océano."

Fortunately, however, Miya was quick to act. She conjured spirit magic to fill the heavens above with water. It was an incredible sight—the sky and sea mingled, swallowing the volcanic air and rubble.

"How 'bout that?" Miya asked, grinning smugly.

Her attitude was incredibly infuriating, but in light of her extraordinary play just now, Leyfa decided to overlook her insolence. Miya snapped her fingers. Once the water above had neutralized the pyroclastic blast, its job was done...and it fell to the ground like a waterfall right on top of Leyfa and the others. The princess could no longer brook the half-elf's carelessness.

“I’ll have you beheaded.”

“Why?! I did good, didn’t I?!”

How could she be so sloppy? Her strength left nothing to be desired, but her lack of brains was truly hindering her potential.

“I’ll allow you to redeem yourself. We’re finishing off that dragon.”

Leyfa inserted another gem into the cannon and fired. At the rate things were going, the mountainous beast couldn’t last much longer. Though it was still standing, Leyfa was certain of their victory. This was only the boss of floor 18. For an all-star team like the Princess’s Legion, it was child’s play.

Leyfa’s real enemies were elsewhere. There was Note Athlon, Sofie, and the rest of Arrivers. The Labyrinth Knights, Liberation, and the other dungeon parties too. Then there were her rivals running amok in the royal palace, those who dared to stand in her way to the throne. She would crush them all and force them to grovel before her. They would come to learn that Leyfa Southerndall reigned supreme. Her Legion charged forward toward domination, and the image of her nemesis overlapped with her current opponent in her mind.

The Arrivers and the Great Mountain Dragon

Ever since Sofie joined up with us, the Arrivers had been making pretty smooth progress in the dungeon. We'd cleared through floor 20 before, and though we weren't the same Arrivers we had been with Jin, we now had new abilities and a new member to bolster the group. We were stronger than we'd ever been. Middle floors we'd struggled to clear before were now a breeze, quickly allowing us to reach our current challenge—floor 18.

Floor 18 was a vast, mysterious floor of giants. And I don't just mean the monsters were huge. Everything around us was, including the flora and geographical features.

"These trees are enormous..." It had lost its novelty for us, but Sofie beheld the odd scenery with wonderment. She'd been taking it all in since we first arrived.

"It's kind of refreshing to have someone around who's impressed by every little thing in the dungeon," Erin commented, glancing her way.

Sofie cocked her head at this. "Is it weird?"

"I said it was refreshing, not weird. This is kind of old hat to all of us now."

Erin had a point. The Arrivers hadn't cleared a new floor in nearly a year. All this time we'd been diving with Sofie, we were just retreading familiar territory. We'd forgotten what it was like to be surprised by the dungeon.

"By the way, do you see that mountain over there?" Erin asked.

"Yes," Sofie said with a nod.

"That's the boss of this floor."

Wow, what a waste. She should have built up the excitement a little more.

"Why're you looking at me like that, Note?"

"If you drop spoilers like that, Sofie's not going to have anything to look forward to."

“You mean like what you did to us when we first hit this floor?” she replied snidely.

“I did that?” I asked in disbelief.

“You don’t remember? The first thing you did when we got here was locate the boss with Enemy Search and tell us all about it.”

“Oh... Now that you mention it...” I had a vague memory of being booed by Force. In my defense, though, I figured at the time that it was better to know about the boss earlier rather than later. I’d meant well when I spoiled them. “Guess that does make me a bit of a hypocrite.”

“Honestly, how could you forget about that?”

“I’m sorry! But still, Sofie didn’t have to suffer the same fate...”

I looked over at our knight. She didn’t seem particularly interested in our conversation and was simply watching on with her usual stoic expression.

“I don’t really mind. I’m not here to have fun with you all.”

That sounded just as bad to me. I knew she wasn’t here to have fun per se, but nothing was stopping her from enjoying the wonderment of the dungeon. I hadn’t invited her into the Arrivers strictly to bolster our numbers, after all. Being thrown out by Leyfa had devastated her, and I wanted her to have some source of hope. That meddlesome motive was why I’d reached out to her, but I’d yet to see any light in her eyes.

Right now, Sofie was just going through the dungeoneering motions out of a sense of obligation. She’d only devoted herself to the Arrivers because she felt indebted to us. Was that what she really wanted? Was this the kind of relationship she sought? Was there something else she’d rather be doing? I couldn’t say with confidence. If things continued like this, would things truly be any different than they had with Leyfa? She was bound to us by chains of debt, expending her own strength to achieve our goals. It was a faulty, warped coexistence.

I knew we couldn’t go on like this, but I didn’t know what to do about it. It wasn’t like Sofie objected to the arrangement. She’d been in awe of the scenery of floor 18 when she first saw it, so I knew she at least had enough of a heart to

feel wonder. And yet she was doing everything in her power to repress that—to keep herself from enjoying anything or being happy. At least, that’s how it seemed to me.

“So, what’s the plan? How do you want to handle this floor?” Erin asked.

Right...

I snapped back to my senses when I heard her voice. We were in the dungeon right now. Our top priority was clearing this floor safely.

“Should we try cutting Erin loose?” Force suggested. “We’ve been keeping her on the sidelines ’cause we weren’t getting any practice in when she participated, but aren’t the monsters gonna start to get stronger around here? Maybe it’s time to let her do her thing.”

Erin was the one who’d improved the most dramatically during the Arrivers’ hiatus. With near infinite magical energy thanks to Superior Mana Pool, she’d cast countless spells without end in order to master them. It was a brute-force training method that had forged her into a walking weapon of mass magical destruction. She could cast an infinite number of extremely high-power spells with absolute precision. That’s how OP she was right now.

If she went all out here and now, she could incinerate this floor in virtually no time at all. All we had to do was protect her from any monsters that got close, so there wasn’t any real teamwork involved. That was why we’d essentially benched her until now, but maybe Force was right. Maybe it was about time we tried working together in preparation for the end floors.

“You sure?” Erin asked. “If you cut me loose, I’ll wipe out this whole floor.”

“You sure still talk a big game, don’tcha?” Force laughed.

“It’s not just talk anymore. Now I play big too.”

“I’m looking forward to the show, then.”

Our close-quarters ace and our long-range cannon joked around with each other the same way they always did. They’d both mellowed out in the past year, but they still had a friendly rivalry going between them.

“What are my orders?” Sofie inquired.

Erin brushed her hair out of her face and replied, “Just watch my back. That’s all you have to do.”

Back when the reformed Arrivers first resumed dungeon diving, Erin had burned down the entirety of floor 16 by herself. I figured she’d do something similar here on floor 18, but what she pulled instead was far beyond my wildest imaginings. In a bad way.

Immediately after we decided to cut her loose, Erin started charging a spell. An extremely dense amount of magic energy gathered around her. By the time I realized what she was about to unleash, it was too late to stop her.

A mass—a torrent—of magical energy surged forth from the magic circle behind her. The light cut an arc through the sky, gleaming ominously over our heads. The instant it vanished from sight, I heard a rumbling explosion in the distance. I wasn’t sure what had just happened, but the following earthquake explained everything.

Erin had opened with a warning shot at the boss.

None of the other mobs here were a challenge for her. That was what she’d just announced to all of floor 18. She had her eyes on the biggest prize, and she was going straight for it in a fashion that defied the very setup of the dungeon. She’d made her intentions known loud and clear too—even to the dragon, which awoke from its slumber with a roar and set its sights on us.

“What are we supposed to do now...?” I muttered.

Aggroing the boss wasn’t anything strange. The trouble here was skipping all the buildup and jumping straight to that part. A spell that could wake the boss from this distance was bound to attract the attention of every mob on the floor, which might even still be manageable...except the mid-boss would be among their numbers too.

“We’re gonna end up fighting every single enemy on this floor at once now, you realize?”

“So what? If we can’t handle that much, we don’t stand a chance against floor 21.”

To my surprise, Erin had acted with full knowledge of what she was doing. Still, this was absolutely ridiculous. She could've at least warned us. We should've decided as a group whether this was the right play or not.

"Roslia and Sofie, you take the normal mobs. Force, the mid-boss is all yours. Take it down ASAP. Erin, you got us into this mess, so the boss is your responsibility."

"Yeah, I know. I just have to take down the dragon, right? Should be easy."

"I sure hope you know what you're doing..."

Her reply was worrying, but things had already been set in motion. There was no end to the number of regular monsters that could spawn here, so Roslia and Sofie would have their hands full. Whether or not we had the upper hand would depend on how quickly Force could take out the mid-boss.

As I was mulling over our strategy, Erin continued casting spells. The mountain range in the distance was clearly creeping closer. It was steadily advancing in order to get within range of the pesky, arrogant mage firing at it nonstop. Yet no matter how strong Erin was, Phantom Seventh Sage or not, she was only human. There was a limit to her spells' power, and casting spells over dozens of kilometers naturally weakened them. It'd be impossible for her to finish the dragon off before it could fire back.

"Force, the mid-boss is approaching from two o'clock."

"Roger."

Force's sharpened senses seemed to have picked up on the formidable enemy approaching already. He started running to meet it before I finished speaking.

"Wait a minute!" Neme tried to keep Force from running off. The start of the battle had been so hectic, she couldn't keep up with her priestess duties. "I haven't cast my buffs yet!"

Without even a glance back at the panicked Neme, Force said bluntly, "Don't bother."

She seemed shocked by this reply and flushed with anger. "How rude! What is that supposed to mean?! You don't think you need Neme anymore?!" She

aborted the spell she was preparing to cast and began swinging her staff in a rage. “You’re not my friend anymore! Neme’s never casting a spell for you again! If you get hit by a monster, you can handle the consequences by yourself!”

“C’mon, don’t sulk like that. I’m not saying I don’t need you, Neme.”

“What are you saying, then?”

“Your buffs won’t work on floor 21, so don’t you think it’d be a good idea for me to get some experience fighting without them?”

Surprisingly enough, Force was thinking ahead too. This was what he’d decided he needed to do for himself... But he sure could have explained it better. One way or the other, it’d be a dangerous test.

“Are you gonna be okay?” I asked. “Can you take down the mid-boss fast enough without Purgatory?”

Purgatory was Force’s cursed sword. It ate away at him with a black fire in exchange for sinister attack power. He normally withstood the flames between his Major Magic Resistance and Neme’s regenerative healing spells, so without the latter, I suspected he’d be challenging the mid-boss with his other sword, Gleaming Beast. Needless to say, his reply shocked me.

“No, I’m using Purgatory.”

“But—”

“Just to be clear, Erin isn’t the only one who’s improved.” Force drew the flaming Purgatory from its black sheath and assumed a fighting stance. “I can use Purgatory even without Neme’s support.”

Now it made sense... Force was working on his own tactics for floor 21. Jin, his fellow founding Arriver and closest battle brother, had been taken from him by the devilish boss there. He was preparing for a grudge match.

“Then what about Neme’s spells?!”

“Like I said, don’t bother.”

“Neme’s out of a job!”

She was clearly disappointed, but there wasn't much to be done about it. Her holy magic wouldn't work on floor 21, so we'd have to find a way to work without it sooner or later. She'd surely have her chance to shine, though. There was no doubt in my mind that we'd be dependent on her for a later floor.

Shortly after Force disappeared into the forest, I could hear the sound of clashing blades. He was going toe-to-toe with the mid-boss. I was feeling a little relieved he could hold his own, but my relief was cut short when I detected an alarming threat behind us. I turned to see a diamond-like gleam coming from the giant dragon's maw. But we couldn't afford to revel at the beautiful sight—it was a beam attack! The dragon was finally within firing range.

"Sofie, put up a defensive spell."

"Got it."

Sofie opened her mouth to begin a chant, and just then, a tremendous amount of magical energy shot over our shoulders.

"There's no need for that," called Erin.

A stream of light was surging forth from her staff. No, that raging torrent was too intense to be called a stream. The laser she fired flew straight at the incoming beam.

"Are you trying to have a shootout...?" I gasped.

It was a stunning spectacle. The dragon's beam and Erin's ray of light collided in a competition for domination. Erin won out in the end, and the dragon shook its head to avoid the laser barreling at it.

"Ugh, I missed my chance. If I'd nailed it in the mouth, that would've been game over."

"That's what you were going for...?"

It was spectacular enough to see her face off with a monster several thousand times her size, but she'd actually intended to beat it in an out-and-out power clash like that? It was like we were in different worlds... Erin could only see herself beating the dragon solo.

"Come on, let's go!"

Erin cast her next spell without pause. In contrast, the giant dragon's beam seemed to require a recharge period. With no way of counterattacking, the beast took Erin's next spell directly. And even when its beam was ready to fire again, Erin shot it right down. This was turning into a one-sided massacre.

After taking hit after hit, the dragon entered its rage mode. "Rage mode" was a Neme-ism for when its health dropped below a certain level and the volcano on its back would erupt in a wide-area attack. Just as the mountain peak started glowing red, there was a burst of light and sound. The raging mountain spewed lava and rock everywhere with a thunderous roar.

"Branched Beam!"

Erin incinerated the pyroclastic projectiles coming our way with a branching laser beam. I could see the monsters in the woods getting doused with the lava spray. The forest scenery that had touched Sofie's heart was being burned to a crisp between the volcanic dragon and nuclear Erin. The dragon did more than erupt, however. It continued to fire its breath beam, now red and hotter than before. Erin cast a branching laser to counter it.

"Roslia, Sofie, take care of the small fry!" she shouted. "Roaring Cannonfire!"

By "small fry," did she mean the pyroclastic projectiles? Since she couldn't doublecast, Erin gave up on intercepting the volcanic debris in favor of dealing with the more dangerous beam attack. However, even though she called them "small fry," the burning-hot boulders were up to several meters across. Any normal person would die if struck by one. Roslia and Sofie were already occupied with the other monsters too. They couldn't switch targets so suddenly... Or so I thought, but I heard an unexpected reply. It was Sofie.

"Understood. Fuerte-Tierra-Pared."

Using her spirit arts, she created an earthen wall to block the incoming debris. She was in the middle of a group of monsters, however, which closed in on her while she was busy defending against the dragon.

"Sofie!"

I started running one beat too late. A giant elephant kicked her directly in the torso. It sent her flying, her body bent in half. Her Iron Wall skill might be tough,

but this was floor 18. A direct hit like that was dangerous. I evaded one monster and then the next to go running after her, but making my way through the crowd of mobs while dodging hot rocks was tricky. I couldn't get close enough.

"Heal her, Neme!" I cried.

"Right!"

Neme's magic reached Sofie, whose body glowed in a green light. Almost immediately after, the closest cyclops raised its club high and brought it down on Sofie's head with a dull, echoing thud.

"Shadow Runner!"

This was no time to be worried about dodging every little thing. I made a beeline for Sofie. In the blink of an eye, I was below the cyclops attacking her. I struck without hesitation.

"Spell Shot!"

I fired the only ace I had up my sleeve—an attack I could only use twice to deal damage. A burst of Erin's magic blew through the massive cyclops, leaving a clearly fatal cavity in its gray body.

"You okay, Sofie?"

I called out to the girl on the ground in a fluster. Blood was flowing from her head, and her hand was bent in a weird way. But thankfully, she was still breathing.

"I'm fine. My earth wall is still up." She shifted, giving an irrelevant reply.

I confirmed that Neme's healing spell was still reaching her before picking her up to retreat. "I meant *you*."

"I'm fine. I won't die that easily."

"That's not the problem here..."

While the cyclops's attack hadn't killed her yet, it still might. The blood pouring from her mouth was proof she was seriously hurt, and that was ignoring her obviously broken bones. Without Neme's magic, she would've been a goner.

“Sorry! I only just finished with the mid-boss,” Force called, returning to the fray. He swiftly moved in to start picking off monsters.

Sofie was no longer in any danger thanks to Neme. She’d even stopped bleeding, but I figured it would be for the best to give her some time. With that thought, I laid her down beside Neme.

“It’s okay. I’ve recovered. I can still fight,” she said, grabbing my shoulder.

“But—”

“This is the dungeon. We can’t afford to rest after every minor injury. Right?”

“Right, but...”

She was absolutely correct. We had some breathing room with Force back on the battlefield, we were in no position to take it easy. If we let our guard down, we might lose someone for real again.

“I’ll get back to it, then.”

Sofie, ignoring my objections, started running toward the monsters.

Though the World Wasn't Kind to Her

While we were successful in defeating the dragon boss, we'd initiated the fight so close to the entrance that it would take us a while to traverse over to the warp crystal at the end of the floor. So, since it was already getting dark, we began making preparations to camp out for the night here on floor 18. Once we'd retrieved all the necessary supplies from our item bags, the conversation returned to the earlier battle.

"I said I'm sorry, okay?!" Erin shouted.

"Are you really?" Roslia asked with a provoking stare. They were in the middle of their usual back-and-forth. "You aggroed the boss out of the blue, and Sofie ended up paying the price for it! If you're really sorry, then you should do my share of setting up camp."

"Why does that mean I have to do your share?! *That's* the part I have a problem with!"

"See? You're not sorry at all. Why are you getting so mad?"

"You bet I'm mad! At least tell me to do Sofie's share!"

Erin had indeed awoken the dragon without a care for the consequences. We'd ended up surrounded, cornered into a giant brawl with every mob on the floor—mid-boss included. The melee had scattered our party, leaving Erin to handle the dragon alone. That much was fine. At least, until it went into rage mode and began shooting wide-area attacks everywhere. Then it became everyone's fight. Sofie had stepped up to tank and was treated to quite a beating for her trouble.

Thus Erin was currently standing trial. The defendant had pleaded guilty to all charges. She'd even shown remorse for her crimes, yet the prosecutor was trying to take advantage of her guilt and make nonsensical demands of her as punishment. It was hard to tell who was in the wrong here.



“Fine,” Roslia conceded. “You can do my share *and* Sofie’s share.”

“There’s nothing ‘fine’ about that! How does that even make sense?! I’m not complaining about helping out Sofie. I just want to know why I have to help *you* too.”

“Just think about it. If Sofie hadn’t gotten injured, she’d be doing my share of the work right now. And thanks to you, I can’t ask her to do that for me. So it only stands to reason that you take responsibility.”

“Why are you always making Sofie do things for you anyway?! You should be doing your own share of the work regardless!”

Erin had a point there. With justice on her side, the defendant prevailed in the end. What a turnaround. The prosecutor would have to be tried for her own crimes at a later date.

“You don’t have to worry about me,” the injured party piped up. “I can even handle your share too, Erin.”

“Hey, uh, Sofie—” I started to object. It’d be best if she stayed out of this for fear of complicating matters. Yet before I could say my piece...

“Oh, that’d be great!” exclaimed Roslia.

“You shouldn’t let her get away with that, Sofie! Don’t volunteer to do her work for her! It’s only going to go to her head!” Erin yelled. “You don’t need to do anything else today, so just take it easy and leave it all to me.”

“Now, as for my share...” Roslia cut in.

“There’s no way I’m doing yours!” Erin raged.

Though she’d put Sofie in harm’s way earlier, she had no ill intentions. In fact, based on her exchange with Sofie just now, Erin was actually trying to look out for her. She’d just gotten tunnel vision when it came to the boss fight—typical of her recklessness. She was trying to make up for that after the fact, though it didn’t seem to be working on Sofie.

“My wounds have already healed. I don’t need to take it easy,” she insisted.

“Whether you’ve healed or not, please take a little break,” Erin insisted in

turn.

“That’s all right. I’d prefer to do my duty.”

“Why are you so stubborn?”

“I’m just abiding by my principles. Is that so wrong?”

“All right, all right,” I intervened, not wanting things to get any more heated. Erin and Sofie were both sticking to their guns, which led to them butting heads...even though they each wanted to help the other. The whole thing was frustrating to listen to. “Let’s just set up camp for now. We can argue later.”

“Got it,” Erin replied, sighing and slumping her shoulders.

Sofie, meanwhile, simply stood there and watched me silently.

“How are you feeling?” I asked.

“No problems to report,” she answered succinctly.

“All right. You can help pitch camp, but I’m sticking you on light duty. That cool with you? Leave the heavy lifting to those two,” I said, pointing at Erin and Roslia.

The former nodded in agreement, and the latter went wide-eyed.

“Why me?!”

“As punishment for foisting your chores on Sofie,” I informed her.

“What?! But I didn’t even get away with it!”

“Fine, let me correct myself. As punishment for foisting all your chores on Sofie until now.”

“Guh... I can’t deny that...” Roslia bit down on her lip with a bitter look.

“Skipping out on any more work will cost me affection points with you, so I have no choice but to accept this graciously...”

“Saying that out loud doesn’t really help your case.”

After being put in her place, Roslia would probably pull her weight around camp. She wasn’t truly a stinker at heart. At least, I didn’t think so.

“So, does that work for you?” I asked Sofie.

“Well, I suppose...” she conceded, only looking half-convinced.

*

Sofie’s dedication was commendable, but she had a tendency to take things too far. It’d be too late to do anything about it if it got the best of her in battle, like it nearly had earlier, so I invited her out for a talk late that evening. I was waiting for her by the riverbank some distance from camp.

Eventually, a girl with sleepy eyes and hair the color of the night itself appeared. She wore unique armor that had the trappings of a maid’s uniform. I could tell it was her at a glance, even hidden among the shadows of the trees.

“You came,” I called.

Stepping out into the moonlight, she replied, “What is this? A love confession?”

I had something pretty serious to discuss with her, but that threw me for a pretty serious loop. I sat there in stunned silence. Granted, when a guy calls a woman out in the middle of the night, it probably comes off as something along those lines. And this was Sofie we were talking about. She wasn’t the type to joke around, so she was asking a serious question here.

“Sorry, but I don’t see you that way,” she continued. “And I won’t be changing my mind in the future either. Honestly speaking, I’d prefer you keep your confession to yourself. It would only be a hassle for me.”

“Ummm...”

“But I owe you for bringing me into the party, and I mean to repay that debt. If you absolutely insist on dating, I will hate it, but I will do it with the utmost reluctance.”

“That’s not what I wanted to talk about, Sofie.”

“It’s not?”

“Nope. Not even close, actually.”

“I see...”

And so the guy who got rejected without ever even asking and the woman

who did the rejecting without ever even listening stared at each other awkwardly. Sofie—who usually couldn't read the room—began averting her eyes and nervously shifting her weight from foot to foot.

“Sorry...”

“Nah, it was my fault for giving you the wrong idea...”

We both apologized, but the situation was still painful. I'd invited Sofie out alone so we could have a real heart-to-heart, and that had backfired on me. If I'd gotten everyone in on this, it wouldn't have invited the opportunity for any misunderstanding. But sitting around awkwardly wasn't going to change anything, so I decided to get down to business anyway.

“Say, Sofie, do you regret joining the Arrivers?”

“Do I regret it?” She seemed puzzled by the sudden question.

“Yeah.” I continued without waiting for an answer, “I kinda talked you into joining the party, and that's why you feel indebted to me. So I'm wondering if there's something you'd rather be doing than dungeon diving with the Arrivers.”

Sofie prioritized her obligations above all else. She'd virtually said as much earlier—she only saw me as a creditor who needed repaying, to the point she'd make herself miserable to satisfy her debts to me. If she was willing to date someone she didn't even like to that end, then joining a dungeon party was probably nothing.

“What gave you that idea?” Sofie asked. There was no discernible emotion in her black eyes.

“Dunno. If I had to say, I guess it's because you look so unhappy sometimes,” I said, choosing my words carefully. “I can understand if you're not having fun. You just started dungeon diving, so you're out of your element. These floors are all old news to us too, so it's not like we're getting the most out of this either.”

On I went, but Sofie remained stoic. I had no idea if I was speaking to her heart or if I was way off the mark. I felt like I was fumbling in the dark.

“I can also understand if you want to keep your distance from us. You only

just joined up, after all. Everyone has such strong personalities. It isn't easy to approach them."

I wish she'd at least give me some sign of a response, but she stayed silent. All I could hear was the rustling of the forest and her quiet breathing. Despite that, I pressed forward.

"But that's not really what's eating you, is it? You find life with the Arrivers painful. That's the feeling I get."

"I don't particularly feel that way... What makes you think so?"

For a brief instant, I thought I saw her eyes waver in the dark. Even if I hadn't spotted it, the fact that she was inquiring further told me everything I needed to know.

"Since joining the Arrivers, you've been eager to sacrifice yourself, whether it's taking on Roslia's chores or taking attacks for us."

Everyone in the party acknowledged the burdens she took on for us. Hell, she even made dessert for Neme all the time. Then there were times like the boss fight earlier, where she'd stepped up to take a blow for us when she'd already had her hands full defending herself. She was so selfless...that it was abnormal.

"Why are you willing to go so far?"

"Because I'm indebted—"

"No, not like this. You don't owe us that much." That was what had tipped me off to what was really going on inside her head. "I get why you're so loyal to Princess Leyfa. She extended a hand to you when your parents died and you lost everything, including your noble status."

Sofie had shared as much with me while I was being held prisoner at the hotel. Her story was a sad one, but it certainly explained her fierce loyalty to the Tyrant Princess.

"So I understand why you've done the things you have. Why you locked me up. Why you attacked me that rainy morning. You were driven by your devotion to Her Highness."

Sofie said nothing. Even though her sworn liege had kicked her to the curb,

she was steadfast in her dedication. That's what her silence told me.

"All we've done is make trouble for you, though. We're the reason you lost your standing with the princess, so we offered you another home with the Arrivers. That's nothing compared to what Princess Leyfa did for you."

Really, it was the least we could've done for her. She didn't owe us a damn thing, much less her fealty.

"When you joined up with us, you said you'd risk life and limb to help us clear the dungeon...but you never swore loyalty to the Arrivers. You were just saying you'd 'repay your debt' to us."

They weren't the same thing. Sofie had committed to dungeon conquest, yet she went out of her way to help the Arrivers outside of the dungeon too. All in the name of this "debt" she kept talking about. But someone with Sofie's sense of propriety had to know the difference. It wasn't really loyalty that compelled her; it was the sense that she still *owed* something.

"Helping us in the dungeon is more than enough to clear any debt you owe us. Yet you go out of your way to help us outside the dungeon whenever you can too. Am I wrong?"

Again, Sofie said nothing. Her stoic facade had cracked, however, to reveal her inner turmoil. I could hear her gulp nervously. The quiet of the night put her on the spot.

"To me, it looks like you're punishing yourself. You're not acting like an indentured knight. You're acting like you're not allowed to be happy."

Her behavior earlier had convinced me of that. I'd had a hunch all along, but the boss encounter cinched it. She'd taken an attack for us all—when it was completely the wrong move. If she'd gone down for real, it would've left the rest of us to face the horde of monsters she was occupying, and with one less fighter to boot. It would've broken our formation, and we all would've been in danger of going down with her.

She *should* have split her aggro between me and Roslia before moving to block the volcanic blast. Someone as calm as Sofie had to have realized that. She'd been clear and concise about good strategy with Roslia on the earlier

floors. She knew we could handle that much, so there was no other explanation. It was a suicidal move—and an intentional one. She'd thrown tactics out the window and jumped in harm's way...all because she was punishing herself.

"Is it an apology to Princess Leyfa for joining the Arrivers?" I asked. "Do you feel like you're helping her enemies or something? But you're stuck with us because you feel like you owe us? So you're hurting because you're being pulled between two poles?"

"No..."

"Then stop it. Forget whatever promise you made to us. Nothing matters more to you than Princess Leyfa, right? It's okay to prioritize what's really important to you."

"It's not!"

"I invited you to the party because I was hoping you could find happiness, so this is all rather pointless if it's making you so miserable. If it's forcing you to punish yourself, then you don't have to dungeoneer with us anymore."

"It's really not!" she yelled with all her might in an unusual burst of emotion. She had her eyes squeezed shut and her fists tightly clenched. "You're right. I was trying to punish myself. I *wanted* to be in pain."

This was her confession. For the first time, Sofie was giving voice to what she'd felt living and working with the Arrivers.

"But you're wrong about why... I am sorry to Her Highness, but that isn't the cause."

"Then what is?" I asked, the words rushing out of my mouth.

Yet Sofie softly shook her head. "I don't want to say."

It was a clear rejection. A declaration that she didn't want me to pry any deeper. It was rare for her to state her wishes so directly. Under normal circumstances, I'd be willing to respect that. But if I pulled back here—if I turned a blind eye to her pain—then nothing would change. She'd continue to seek punishment in our party, and I couldn't have that. So I gave her another

nudge.

“All right, you don’t have to tell me. But at least tell me *why* you don’t want to tell me.”

Her eyes darted around hesitantly before she spoke up again. “It’s because I’m not the pure soul you think I am.”

I wasn’t sure what she meant by that, but she proceeded to explain.

“There’s an ugliness inside of me. I want to be liked. I don’t want people to hate me. But I’m a hideous person controlled by the shallow emotions I despise. It’s all I can do to keep up appearances.” She then took a deep breath before saying, “If this party knew what I was hiding, you would all hate me for sure. That is what I fear.”

I never knew Sofie was harboring such feelings. I understood that everyone had their own worries, pains, and weaknesses—including me, Erin, Force, Miya, and even Jin in his time. That was something I’d only discovered after joining the Arrivers and learning to face people. A younger, self-destructive Note never would’ve been able to appreciate it. After Miya dumped me, I thought I was the unluckiest guy in the world. I thought everyone *but* me was happy.

Yet happiness and misery aren’t things you can read in someone’s face. We tend to file people under either category, but that’s got to be wrong. Everyone carries happiness and misery with them throughout their days. They’re not mutually exclusive. And I was now learning that about the girl before me.

“This may surprise you, but I don’t hate life in the Arrivers. At the end of the day, I find it kind of fun. This is the first time I’ve ever experienced anything like it... After my parents died and Princess Leyfa picked me up, I thought I’d live out my life by her side.” Sofie spilled her guts haltingly. “I’ve never had the chance to spend time like this with people my age. It’s new. It’s exciting. But...it’s also painful.”

I’d considered Sofie one of the world’s miserable unfortunates without a second thought. In other words, I knew nothing about her. I’d been acting like I was concerned about her, but it was all superficial. I had no idea who she really was deep down. I had no idea what she really thought and felt.

“I’m a criminal. I’m hiding something important from all of you.” She looked right at me. “Honestly, I don’t want to tell you because I don’t want you to despise me. But I know I can’t keep it a secret forever. You’ll surely find out someday, and it will bring these dear days to an end.”

There was a fire burning in her eyes. She looked like she was on the verge of tears.

“So if the end is to come anyway, it might as well be by my own doing. If you want to know, I’ll tell you everything.”

But she refused to shed a tear. She held them back with all her might and continued, “My name is Sofie Deanlurk. Does that make the situation clear?”

I shook my head.

“In that case...” she murmured to herself. She then declared, “I am the daughter of the lord Jin killed. I am also the one who sent the Headhunter after him.”

Sofie looked at me with the gravest of expressions. She spoke with such gravity, like she was revealing the darkest of the world’s secrets. In contrast, I was a little disappointed that was all she’d had to say.

“What? I knew that already.”

Though it might have been rude to Sofie, who was clearly deeply troubled by it, that was the truth. I was privy to everything she’d just told me. It was hard to feign surprise.

“You knew...?” Her eyes shot wide open, as though she couldn’t believe my reaction.

I added in explanation, “I know your father was the guy who turned Jin into an assassin. And I know he lost his life to his creation. That’s why you hired the Headhunter.”

Shock flashed across Sofie’s face.

“There’s no way I *couldn’t* know all that, you know? I was the one who pitted the Headhunter against Princess Leyfa, remember? He told me everything.”

In truth, it was technically his informant, Eisha, who’d told me. I’d sent a letter

to her and Hugel asking for help against the princess. I'd ended up throwing around the Headhunter's reputation as a hitman for justice, but my original plan had only been to ask for information on some weakness to use against her. When Eisha realized that Sofie was involved, however, she'd put two and two together and offered up her intel on the young knight too. That was how I'd learned of Sofie's connection to Jin.

"I see..." Hearing this was like a bolt out of the blue for her. She went slack-jawed in disbelief. "Why... Why did you let me into the Arrivers if you knew that?"

That was her crime. The secret she hadn't wanted anyone to find out. She'd probably kept it under such tight wraps because she thought we'd kick her out of the party if we learned of it.

"Because it's irrelevant," I told her. "It's not like you killed Jin yourself. I stopped the Headhunter with my own hands. We lost Jin to the dungeon."

If the Headhunter had actually taken Jin's life at Sofie's request, I might not have been able to forgive her. But in reality, Jin had died in completely unrelated events. We got complacent in the dungeon and paid the ultimate price for it. Regardless of what Sofie had meant to accomplish, blaming her for Jin's death was misguided.

"Even so! I tried to kill one of your party members! Though I failed, I still tried...!"

"If you want to play that game, then I tried to kill Princess Leyfa. We're even."

"That was because we kidnapped Neme!"

"And in your case, Jin killed your father."

I couldn't condone what Jin had done. He was the man I admired most, but he still didn't get a free pass. By his own admission, he'd once been a cold-blooded killer. Who was I to deny it? Yet in spite of his past, I adored Jin. Not the assassin who'd once served Deanlurk, but the Arriver. To me, what he used to be didn't matter. The past was behind us, and it didn't change who he'd become over his life. It didn't lessen the respect I carried for him to this day.

"Still, I find it questionable that you'd recruit someone who's tried to kill one

of your party members,” Sofie said warily.

“Really?” I responded.

“At the very least, it isn’t normal...”

“Yeah, you might be right there. Princess Leyfa told me I’m just the kind of guy who does whatever it takes to achieve his goals, apparently.”

And in Sofie’s case, that goal had been filling our sixth slot. In order to accomplish it, I’d picked up a girl who’d been cast aside by her master and had no will left to live. That was why I invited Sofie to the party. I could look past my own feelings and a grudge or two if it meant getting what I wanted.

“Come to think of it, she did say that,” Sofie sighed tiredly. “You really are strange. Do you honestly think I can remain in the Arrivers?”

“If you don’t mind the fact you’re part of a party founded by your dad’s killer.”

“I do mind a bit, but I can turn a blind eye since I don’t hate my current life.”

She didn’t hate life with us. While that would’ve been an underwhelming statement coming from anyone else, it was momentous from Sofie. The sadness in her eyes was gone.

“Still, I’m surprised you could convince the others to keep me on board. Even if you’re fine with it, I imagine they don’t enjoy adventuring with the person who tried to have Jin assassinated...”

“Actually...” I was briefly at a loss for words but ultimately decided to come clean. “In truth, the others don’t know. Not about your family or about you trying to assassinate Jin.”

“They don’t...?”

“In fact, they don’t even know about the Headhunter. I haven’t told them anything.”

I proceeded to lay everything out for Sofie. I told her about how I’d driven back the Headhunter with the help of a former Valkyrie thief, and how I’d used the connection I forged with the Headhunter then to recruit his help against Leyfa. I chose my words carefully so as not to reveal Hugel and Eisha’s

identities, but I was otherwise perfectly honest with her...including the fact that no one else in the party knew about all this.

Sofie listened to my story silently. As soon as I was done, she mumbled but one thing: "You kept something so important from everyone?"

"Yeah."

"And you don't feel guilty?"

"I'm not completely heartless." I just wasn't as honest as Sofie. I didn't share her high moral standards. "I simply felt it would be better to stay silent, so I did. I believe everyone's happier this way."

Telling the team about the Headhunter's attack wouldn't have benefited anyone but me. Jin would've felt guilty for causing me trouble, and then there was the increased risk of exposing the Headhunter's identity after he'd done me a solid in the end. No one would have benefited from knowing that I'd relied on Hugel to rescue Neme either. If circumstances had been different, Leyfa could have been killed too. I didn't want my friends involved in all that. I was the only one who needed to dirty their hands.

"Are you saying it's okay for me to keep hiding the fact I'm Lord Deanlurk's daughter who tried to kill Jin?"

"Why not? If that's what you want to do and you believe it's the best option, then yeah."

Personally, I believed there were plenty of better secrets to keep. The only reason I'd pried into Sofie's was because it clearly pained her. If she had secrets that had nothing to do with her life as an Arriver, I wouldn't press her. I'd only done it this time because I thought leaving it be would cause more suffering.

"You don't need to feel guilty about anything," I told her. "Just choose what's best for you."

If the guilt was too much to bear, she could open up if she wanted. But if she wanted to bear it silently, then she could stay quiet. I would respect Sofie's choice either way.

Her eyes cast downward, she said, "I'll keep it a secret, then..." She'd chosen

the same option I had. “No one would be happy to hear it, and I think I’d like to try living life with people who don’t know my past.”

“Sounds good.”

“Besides, Force is better off unaware of my history. He was involved in my father’s murder, so there’s no telling how he’ll react finding out I’m a Deanlurk.”

Apparently Sofie was already aware that Force had played a part in Jin turning on her dad. Lord Deanlurk had sent Jin to assassinate Force originally, but Force won Jin over with his charm and turned the tables on the lord. How *would* he react if he found out Sofie’s last name was Deanlurk? Would he resent her as the daughter of the man who’d wanted him dead? Would he hate her as the girl who’d put a hit on his best friend? Or would he feel guilty toward her as the daughter of a man he’d had a hand in killing? I’d known the guy for a good while now, and I had no idea.

“So you knew about Force too, huh?” I asked Sofie.

“The Headhunter told me,” she explained.

“I didn’t think you were aware.”

“How come?”

“I figured that you wouldn’t have joined the party otherwise.”

Most people wouldn’t agree to join forces with their parent’s killers. Sofie had every right to hate Force as much as she did Jin.

“I actually regret asking the Headhunter to kill Jin. It was a rash decision,” she explained. “When he told me he’d failed, I was truly relieved. You might find that hard to believe, though.”

“I wouldn’t doubt you over something like that.”

“The truth is, I understand. My father was completely in the wrong. But I didn’t want to accept that... If I did, there really would be no one left on his side. So I’ve childishly closed my eyes to it all.”

No one could blame Sofie for feeling that way. What was wrong with wanting to stand by the people you loved? If anything, she deserved to be commended

for taking on the world alone. Her heart was beyond reproach.

“That’s why I don’t feel any particular resentment toward Force. I may not be able to get as close to him as the others, but I believe I can handle being in the same party.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Thanks for sticking with us.”

“You don’t have to be grateful to me. Just protect my secret. Now that you know the truth, you can’t go telling it to the others.”

“I know. I’ll promise you that much. We’re secret-keeping accomplices now.”

And so we made a promise under the moonlight. With no one else around, it was like we were the only two people in the world. We hadn’t signed a contract or crossed our pinkies, yet the commitment we’d made to each other was absolute.

“Accomplices... That doesn’t sound too bad.”

Sofie digested the words, then nodded contentedly. Thus we broke free of the unhealthy debt binding us and began moving forward as partners in crime, each helping the other carry their burden. That was the moment Sofie truly became a part of the Arrivers.

“If we’re accomplices, I don’t have to hold back anymore, right?” she asked.

“You bet. We’re partners now.”

“Then I have one thing to say.”

“Yeah, sure. Get whatever you need to off your chest.”

“In that case...” Sofie took a deep breath. “To be honest, I really think there’s something wrong with you for inviting me into the Arrivers when you knew that my father’s killer founded the party.”

“Huh?!”

“I mean Jin, but there’s also Force too. You assumed I was none the wiser and basically scammed me into—”

“Hey, wait a minute...”

“I’m not done yet. To begin with, how could you rook someone into joining

your party because they're indebted to you? That's the behavior of a villain. I fundamentally have no respect for you."

"Haha, okay... Maybe that's enough for now..."

"You're the one who told me to get whatever I need to off my chest. Or was that some sham too?"

"No, that's not—"

"Then shut up and listen."

With that, Sofie began to unload on me. She complained—and not just about me. She griped about the way Leyfa treated her, about her family's circumstances, and then some. She was venting eighteen years of pent-up discontent. Our conversation carried on into the night...but I didn't mind so much.

The Renewed Party Takes Shape

“Y’know, she’s changed recently...” Erin muttered.

For once again, Roslia was trying to shirk her chores. But to everyone’s surprise, the one reprimanding her for it now...was none other than Sofie herself.

“Household duties are a shared responsibility,” she reminded the lazy paladin. “If you don’t follow through on your part, you cause a problem for everyone else.”

“Then if you’d just do my chores for me—”

“That wouldn’t be any good for you. You need to change your indolent ways.”

Sofie was doing an excellent job of turning down favors she would have readily agreed to before. Erin and I watched this new sight unfold in wonder.

“You’re right,” I observed in agreement with Erin’s earlier comment. “She doesn’t seem to have a problem speaking her mind anymore.”

“And that’s a good thing. It really feels like she’s part of the party now.”

“Yeah.”

“I have to wonder what brought it on, though. She started acting like this after *that night*, didn’t she?”

“...”

“Why aren’t you saying anything, Note?”

“No reason...”

When Erin said “*that night*,” she was referring to the night I’d called Sofie out to chat on floor 18. We’d blown the whole night just talking, sharing secrets with each other that we couldn’t with anyone else. It had allowed her to get everything off her chest, and I was pretty sure being relieved of that burden was what had effected this change in her behavior. It was a good thing—but

because we'd ended up spending the entire night out, the rest of the party had questions.

Upon returning to camp the following morning, we were subjected to a thorough interrogation about what we'd been doing. In reality, all we'd done was talk. Too bad no one believed that. They tried prying into what we'd talked about, but we couldn't exactly tell them. Sofie and I were partners in crime now. It was going to take more than a little interrogation to make us spill each other's secrets. And thanks to our silence on the matter, the party was still suspicious about what had actually gone down that night.

"You did something to her after all, didn't you?" Erin asked in an accusatory tone.

"I really didn't," I assured her.

"Enough already! Just confess the truth and get it over with!"

"I've been telling you nothing but the truth, though."

"I get it! Boys want quiet girls like her, right?! The docile and demure kind! Well, sorry for being a stubborn loudmouth!"

"Where are you getting your information, exactly...?"

While I was trying to think of a way to calm Erin down, a new voice cut in on our conversation—"Hey, you two! Stop arguing like a couple fighting about cheating and save me!"

I looked over to see Roslia being dragged away by Sofie, who scolded her as they went. "It's time for you to clean the bathtub."

"I'm not in the mood today! I need a nap!" Roslia howled.

"Don't worry. You can nap after you clean the bath."

Honestly, it was an impressive feat of strength on Sofie's part. Even Roslia seemed to realize resistance was futile at this point. She fell limp and silent as she simply let the knight haul her away.



“So you *were* cheating...” Erin muttered, looking at me.

“Shouldn’t you be a little more concerned about Roslia getting dragged off, Erin?” I had to ask.

“And now you’re trying to change the subject! That’s not gonna work.”

“Please listen to me...”

Erin and I weren’t dating yet, so even if I *had* done something with Sofie, it wouldn’t technically be cheating... But pointing that out would have only gotten me in more trouble, so I chose to keep quiet.

“Just so you know, Erin, you’re the third woman! I’m first, of course, and Sofie is second now!” Roslia called back to us.

“How did I end up third?!” Erin demanded.

“Can the peanut gallery please keep comments to herself while she’s being carted away?” I asked in exasperation.

“Note doesn’t see me as a romantic partner. We just have a secret connection,” Sofie offered.

“What is that supposed to mean?! What kind of secret connection?! If it’s not romantic, that just makes it sound more suspicious!”

“Ooh, so you’re friends with benefits?”

“Stop it, Roslia!” I shouted. “Don’t use a turn of phrase Sofie might take the wrong way!”

That was it. This conversation was beyond salvageable. I prayed for someone to save me. I wanted to be somewhere else—anywhere else.

“Regardless of what benefits my friendship with Note has, you’re going to clean the bathtub, Roslia,” Sofie insisted.

“No, don’t talk about our friendship like that!” I yelped. “At least deny it!”

“Even if I do, they’ll still continue to suspect us. It’s a waste of energy.”

“Nevertheless!”

Sofie had a point. She and I had refuted any and all accusations about what

happened “*that night*,” but it didn’t seem like it was doing anything to mitigate everyone’s doubts. This was apparently what life with the Arrivers was going to look like from now on.

*

Since Sofie joined the party, we’d been making steady progress clearing floors with her. We were nearly back to floor 21, where we’d lost Jin. The last hurdle before that was conquering floor 20 again with our current team. Then we could avenge our fallen friend and, moreover, update our floor record for the first time in over a year. Clearing floor 21 would be a huge deal.

We just had to get through floor 20 first, and we were nearly on the verge of doing that. We were currently facing the strongest mob on the floor—the boss. Its chamber was uniquely shaped like a winding maze. And the boss itself, a giant green serpent, freely slithered about the dark passageways. The pit organ between its eyes and nose allowed it to track us even from the shadows—but the boss wasn’t the only one here who could follow enemies in the dark!

“This way! Hurry!” I ran after the great snake with all my might, Neme hoisted over my shoulder. With one glance back to confirm everyone was following, I yelled, “Sofie!”

“I know!”

She activated her spirit magic before I could even finish giving the order. The corridor we were currently in was about two meters wide and tall, and Sofie conjured a wall of earth to close it off, sealing us into dusty darkness.

“How are we doing, Note?!”

“About 80 percent of the way there! We’ll have the boss soon!”

Floor 20 was a massive labyrinth. Back when Erin and I were stranded here, the complex system of passageways had actually worked to our strategic advantage—and the boss was making full use of them as well. As a giant, mobile serpent, it had the upper hand in this vast maze. It would strike, retreat into the tangled web of hallways when threatened, and then strike again from the shadows as soon as you let your guard down. It was too swift to chase after too. It’d be gone in an instant.

The last time the Arrivers were on floor 20, we'd struggled so much against this boss that we'd had to withdraw at first. We were eventually able to take it down thanks to Jin, who was sadly no longer with us... But the Arrivers had new strengths now, meaning we had new ways to fight too.

"All right, Erin! Seal all the hallways we just passed!" I called.

"I'm on it!" she called back.

Our strategy this time around was extremely simple. We were using Sofie's earth spirit arts and Erin's earth magic to close off various passageways of the maze as we went. Then, once the snake had nowhere left to run, Force would square up and fillet the thing. It was a gutsy plan that capitalized on our resources and combat prowess.

We'd already sealed off most of the passageways in the boss chamber too. In another few minutes, we'd have the boss cornered. See, I already had all of floor 20 mentally mapped. Knowing both the layout of the floor and the boss's position, I could figure out which hallways we needed to block. That left me to call the shots, since I was the only one who could keep abreast of every hectic element of this plan.

"The boss will appear soon. Stay on your toes," I warned.

Our preparations were about ninety percent complete now. A fight was imminent. Would the boss catch us first, or would we be able to corner it before then? The complex and shifting game of cat and mouse continued.

"Progress at ninety-five percent! Just one hall left!" I shouted.

No sooner had those words left my mouth than I spotted a pair of red eyes in the darkness. The boss must have realized that any more slithering around was pointless. Instead of letting us corner it completely, it had decided to face us head-on.

That was pretty smart for a reptile, but it was picking a fight with the wrong people. The battle was already decided. There was only one escape route, and in the remaining narrow hall, the boss would have to face the strongest swordsman in the country—Force. With us as backup, of course.

If the snake tried to get away, Erin would open fire. If that didn't work, Roslia

and Sofie were prepared to head it off. And with Neme on our side, the snake would have to kill Force in one shot to get him off its tail. Meanwhile, I was waiting in the wings for my chance to finish it off with Spell Shot.

The boss was well and truly surrounded. Unable to flee, only defeat awaited. Floor 20 was nothing to the new Arrivers. We already had our sights set on our real opponent—floor 21.

The Princess's Legion and Floor 21

Leyfa Southerndall clutched her broken magical bracelet in one hand, stricken with keen regret.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. How did things turn out this way?

Everything had started off smoothly. Though the princess had experienced an unexpected setback in failing to recruit Note Athlon, she'd serendipitously acquired Miya Line and subsequently made steady progress through the dungeon. But now...

The bracelet in her hand was a magical item capable of warding off its owner's death once and only once. The fact it was now broken meant Leyfa was in dire straits. She'd used all four stacks of her magical cross shield, Schildlicht, and the rest of her defensive items had failed her too.

In her arrogance, she'd completely let her guard down.

She'd thought that conquering the dungeon with her own personal party, the Princess's Legion, would be a cinch. After they'd failed on floor 21, she'd believed that the Arrivers were no match for her. *She* would be the one to claim the glory of being the first to clear the dungeon. It was simply a matter of time.

Or so she'd believed, but in the end, the Princess's Legion hadn't fared any better on floor 21. The demonic boss that the Arrivers couldn't defeat had already hobbled half of Leyfa's party. One member was wounded, another had his powers sealed, and a third yet was beyond treatment with holy arts.

They were all living on borrowed time. They'd barely done any damage to the sword-wielding demon, and there was no telling how much longer they could hold out. How had the Arrivers escaped with only a single casualty? Leyfa had no idea anymore. She couldn't see how any of them might survive this situation.

"Leyfa! Pull yourself together!" She could hear a voice calling out to her, but that was all she heard. Her brain wasn't processing the words. It was just

screaming that had no meaning. “Get a grip and give us your orders!”

“If we keep fighting like this, it’ll be the end of us! Hurry up and make a decision!”

What orders? A decision about what?

She couldn’t understand what they were asking of her. Their deaths were all but assured now. What was the point of orders?

The expedition had begun well enough. The monsters on floor 21 were a little annoying, but nothing the Princess’s Legion couldn’t handle. They spawned in small numbers, and the layout of the temple was simple. Clearing floor 21 should have been a breeze.

Leyfa had even scoffed at the lack of a mid-boss. She’d thought to herself, *“What a letdown. The Arrivers lost to a floor like this? I guess the former favorites to conquer the dungeon weren’t such a big deal after all.”* But, oh, how mistaken the princess was. Floor 21 was cunning. It lulled adventurers into a false sense of security before throwing them into a surprise fight against an overwhelmingly powerful and agile boss in a profane sanctum that negated holy arts.

The Princess’s Legion was built around Gilbert as its foundation, so having his holy arts disabled had been especially devastating. With their tank suddenly out of commission, they’d tried to regroup in a hurry...but the fearsome prowess of the demonic boss had them in disarray.



The demon dodged Miya's attacks with ease. And when Onz charged straight at it, the demon simply ignored him. It then descended on their rear line. Leyfa activated her cross shield just as the boss brought down its magic sword. It was commendable she'd reacted in time. Once the demon was fully within view, she'd already expended a stack on her shield.

Seeing this, she exhaled in relief—her first mistake. The attacks continued in rapid succession, and she reflexively continued to rely on Schildlicht. Within seconds, she'd expended all of its uses. And by the time she reached into her bag for another defensive item...it was too late. Her head went flying. She found herself looking at her own decapitated body. She could still feel the sensation of rummaging for an item, but she was observing the gesture from a third-person perspective.

Immediately following that, there came a bursting noise. It was the sound of her death-warding bracelet breaking. A retrogression that defied the laws of the world then took place. A one-time pardon from the god of death. Leyfa only realized she'd spent it when she put her hands on her head, which was now attached to her body again.

Leyfa remembered very little after that. She hardly knew what she'd done or how she was still alive. All she knew was that she'd used up every artifact in her bag and that Mille had ended up gravely wounded in the process of covering for her. Onz, Miya, and the art-less Gilbert were still facing the boss, but they were struggling to land hits while slowly being whittled down themselves.

"Hey, Princess! You're gonna conquer the dungeon, ain'tcha?! You said the throne would be yours, right?! So hurry up and make a call!"

Was that Onz's voice? His tone was even rougher than usual, so Leyfa wasn't sure.

"Agh, forget it! She's useless right now! Let's go with the old man's plan!"

What was the old man's plan? The conversation was completely beyond her.

"You sure?" someone else asked. "Don't you need Leyfa's permission?"

"She's in no state to be giving it! Hey, Limuna!"

“Wh-What is it?”

“Get out of here! Flee the dungeon and go call for help!”

Call for help? They think they can run?

It was true that there was no boss room on this floor. That meant more than six people could fight the boss at once. Theoretically, calling for backup was a good plan. But it was hopeless. This was one of the end floors of the dungeon. Only a small handful of parties could make it here, and of those, Leyfa couldn't imagine any of them coming to her aid.

Would they do it out of the kindness of their hearts? People didn't do anything for that reason. But would they do it for a reward? Perhaps there was *someone* who'd risk it all for that prospect. In fact, if anyone would come to save her now, Leyfa would be willing to grant them any wish.

But no matter the reward, the risk was too great. Who would face certain death for the promise of a prize never to come? No matter what Leyfa had to offer, death would negate its value. Any dungeon party knew that. Those who regularly laid their lives on the line were intimately familiar with the dangers involved.

“Who do I call?!” Limuna screamed.

“Anyone! The Arrivers! I don't care! Just get anyone who can come!” Onz screamed back.

The Arrivers were the last people Leyfa wanted to see, and she was sure the feeling was mutual. Not only had she threatened Note and Neme, but now they'd also taken Sofie in. Leyfa had personally thrown the knight out of the party for her failures. There was no way she'd be willing to lend Leyfa a hand in her hour of need. If anything, she'd probably celebrate the news of her looming demise. It was only natural after what Leyfa had done to her. Humans were naturally that petty.

Regardless, there was no guarantee that Limuna would actually call for help if she managed to escape. She had the chance to flee for her life, and there was no sensible reason for her to return to this deathtrap after the fact. Promising to go get help was the perfect pretext. She could simply leave the party behind

and go about her life like this had never happened. That was surely her plan. It's what Leyfa would have done. She didn't want to die here.

"Wait..." Leyfa called weakly. She tried to rise, but immediately toppled back to the floor. "What?! Why can't I stand up?!" The answer was obvious—her leg was gone below the knee. She had no foot to stand on, plain and simple. "I have to run... I know I have to run, but..."

"Princess..."

"Limuna! Ignore her and go! I'll take responsibility! Now hurry!"

"But everyone will—"

"You're going to get help to save us! Mille's still breathing thanks to that magic item! The princess won't die immediately from her wounds either! We can still manage thanks to Miya's healing spirit arts!"

"But...!"

"We can hold out for another fifteen—no, twenty minutes! So go fetch help before then!"

Fetch help in twenty minutes? That was impossible. There was no way they'd last twenty minutes against that demon. They'd be wiped out in the next two.

"Don't waste another second, Limuna!"

"Fine!"

Limuna turned her back on the boss and took off. She ran as fast as her legs would carry her without ever looking back.

How unfair... I want to run away too. I can't die in a place like this.

Leyfa watched Limuna go, her gaze full of resentment.

Sortie to Floor 21

Sofie and I were sitting in the living room when...

"Help! Someone! Anyone!"

There came a furious banging at the front door. We exchanged questioning glances when we heard it.

"Who's that?" she asked.

"Dunno," I replied. "I don't recognize their presence."

"That voice sounds familiar to me."

"Let's go take a look."

There was no way we could ignore the hysterical commotion, so we approached the door cautiously. I pulled it open to discover a wounded girl on our doorstep.

"Please, come quickly! We need help!" she begged.

"Wait, who's 'we'?" I asked in confusion. I looked to Sofie to exchange another glance, but her reaction was completely different.

"Limuna..." she muttered.

"You know her?" I raised an eyebrow.

"Of course. She's the Mapping navigator Princess Leyfa had on standby in the event you couldn't be recruited."

This was the first I'd ever heard of her, but those weren't the important details right now. Had Limuna been attacked by someone? She was covered in injuries and clearly in need of healing.

"Neme!"

I called over our priestess, who'd already come running at the commotion. She either immediately knew what to do, or her natural instincts as a priestess were just kicking in upon seeing an injured person.

“Forget about me!” the hysterical girl cried as a magical light washed over her. “My party needs help in the dungeon!”

Hold on. Her party needs help?

“They’re in the dungeon?” I asked warily.

“Yes! So don’t worry about me! Please save Princess Leyfa!”

“Say, would they happen to be on floor...”

When I saw how Limuna’s wounds refused to heal, it dawned on me. I knew exactly where her party was.

“Floor 21!” Limuna confirmed.

No way. They seriously went for floor 21?

“What happened?” I asked urgently. “Give me the details!”

“Gilbert’s arts wouldn’t work! Princess Leyfa got attacked! And Mille’s dying! They told me to run!”

Her frantic speech told me how dire the situation truly was. It seemed like Leyfa’s party had properly been introduced to floor 21.

“Obviously! You should’ve known holy arts are sealed there!” I shouted.

We’d gone through the same terrible initiation before. The gimmick of the floor had cost us a comrade, and Leyfa’s party had apparently waltzed into the same trap unprepared. What was her dumb ass thinking? Unlike the Arrivers, who’d been front-runners in unexplored territory at the time, she had every leisure of figuring that much out with a little research. I wanted to curse her idiocy, but it wouldn’t help anything. In truth, I could’ve given her a warning myself. We were rivals, but it wasn’t like I wanted her dead. Blaming her entirely was misguided.

“Princess Leyfa is...” Sofie muttered beside me, pale as a sheet.

Unlike Leyfa, she understood just how fearsome floor 21 was. She’d been living with us for a month now, after all. She’d heard our stories about the grief and dread it filled us with. But even that didn’t shake her. She’d already made up her mind.

“I have to save her immediately!” she shouted.

I grabbed her by the arm. “Wait.”

“Don’t get in my way! Princess Leyfa is...!”

I knew how Sofie felt. I wanted to go save Miya immediately myself. “I understand. You’re going to help her, right?”

“If you understand, then don’t try to stop me! I’m going no matter what! *No matter what!*”

“I know. I’m not trying to stop you—I’m saying we should go together,” I explained, glancing back inside the house. The other Arrivers had already assembled. “Did you guys hear—”

Erin answered my unfinished question. “Sofie says she’s going, so we have to go too. We’re her party members, after all.”

Roslia spoke up next. “Guess we’ve gotta. After living with her all this time, I know how important the princess is to Sofie.”

Despite the bitter smile on her face, the fact that she immediately began getting ready to leave showed how much she cared. Even if she still tried to weasel her way out of her chores all the time, at the end of the day, she was fond of Sofie. Neme felt similarly.

“Neme hasn’t thanked Sofie for all the sweet treats yet! I want to help Sofie too!”

“We were going to clear floor 21 anyway. What difference does it make if we go for it now?” Force added awkwardly.

Truth be told, we weren’t exactly ready for it. We’d only just cleared floor 20 the other day, and we’d yet to have a strategy meeting about how to tackle 21. I would’ve preferred to challenge it only under ideal circumstances, and I was sure Force felt the same way. We’d already lost one comrade there because we were underprepared. Yet here he was saying we should go for it—his way of saying we *were* ready.

“Everyone...”

Sofie seemed surprised by this show of support. But she was one of us now,

and the Arrivers would risk it all for one of their own.

“Thank you,” she said, lowering her head with teary eyes. “I’ll definitely repay this debt!”

“Don’t worry about that.” Erin lightly dismissed her emotional words. “Forget about trivial things like debt. There’s no such thing between party members.”

Though she’d just casually called the one thing that mattered most to Sofie trivial, Erin wasn’t trying to put her down. She was simply saying that there were relationships that weren’t hung on obligation. Mutual relationships between people who cared for one another—be it friends, family, or lovers. Humans form such bonds in lots of different ways, and being fellow party members was one of them.

“You’re right...” Sofie said, sniffing. She then bowed deeply. “Then, please, help me save Princess Leyfa!”

Everyone already had their answer. We were prepared to go to floor 21.

“I’m asking for the same favor,” I piped up. “My childhood friend needs our help too.”

“Come to think of it, Miya *is* in the princess’s party, isn’t she? What a pain...” Roslia sighed. “Oh well. She’s kinda-sorta my friend too, so I can’t just let her die.”

“This Miya girl again, huh...?” Erin had a dubious look on her face, but I decided to ignore that.

Once everyone was ready to go, our party leader gave the order: “All right, let’s move out! We sortie to floor 21!”

Light and Shadow

When did I stop believing in people? Perhaps it was the day I was born. Perhaps it was at some point during my childhood. And perhaps that's the wrong way to think about it. Like a newborn comes into the world crying, perhaps it was in my nature from the very beginning. Or perhaps it was something I developed later in life. Perhaps it was the day I, Leyfa Southerndall, decided to kill my own mother.

My mother was the daughter of a fallen noble house, or so she said. I don't know how true that was. I could have investigated if I'd so wished, but the truth of it wouldn't make a difference now. Her claims simply remained unverified.

Not that it mattered. The importance of her story began when she started working at the royal palace as a court official three years before I was born. Hailing from a good family, she'd presumably been provided with a certain degree of education. She was also beautiful enough that everyone praised her, so it's possible she was hired for her looks. Regardless, she served the royal court, where she met the king and began a relationship with him that resulted in my birth. That's all that mattered.

Of course, my mother was neither the queen consort nor a concubine. My father had a wife and two daughters already. To him, my mother was just an affair. Someone to play with for a night. Meanwhile, my mother had no delusions of affection for him. She'd merely slept with him as a means of gaining power to lord over the people who'd long looked down on her. She became pregnant out of a greedy need for vengeance, and that's how I came to be.

Unfortunately for my father, I inherited my mother's selfishness. My mother, the very embodiment of greed, gave birth to a child just like her...but in the image of a royal, with pale blonde hair and deep purple eyes like the abyss. Such features had been passed down in the royal family for generations, and

they were especially obvious to anyone who'd ever seen my father or a portrait of the king before him.

At first, my father resolved to settle the matter with money. Most servants were happy to take a sum several times what they'd make in a lifetime and quietly live out the rest of their days away from the palace. But not my mother. She was far greedier than the king expected. She wasn't satisfied with money alone. Her goal was revenge, and she had no particular target. She meant to retaliate against the whole world that had been so cruel to her.

My mother, over and over again, always said the same thing to me. That I had to seize the throne. That I must do it at all costs, no matter what it took. That no sacrifice was too great. That I had to be the one to fulfill her dream. Such was the curse my mother cast upon me. Where other mothers hugged their children, mine continued to weave her dark words.

A decade passed like that. As I grew older, the king and his court became unable to ignore my existence any longer. I resembled my father so strongly that no one could deny it. I looked more like him than my older sisters. Eventually the prime minister, who worshipped my father, made a move. Since my mother couldn't be paid off, he attempted to sway her with force. In other words, he threatened us—a miscalculation on his part.

My mother wasn't the kind of frail woman who could be cowed into submission. She was tenacious enough to stand against intimidation, and she rallied all the noble houses who bore animosity against the crown under the banner of her daughter's claim to the throne. It was the very definition of reckless. Who in their right mind would challenge the royal family so directly?

Surprisingly, however, there were many who joined her cause. At first, it was a simple alignment of interests between a foolish mother who firmly believed her daughter should rule and power-hungry nobles who'd leap at any opportunity for control. Yet the army they raised under their flimsy banner grew and grew until it reached an unmanageable size. The more people that got involved, the further they strayed from their original cause. What started as a desperate means of self-preservation became a force to oppose the crown became a mob to overthrow it.

My mother wasn't cut out to achieve greatness. She was never anything more than a shallow woman governed by greed. The more people looked up to her, the greater her misconceptions about herself grew. She genuinely started to believe that she could seize the throne for her daughter. She behaved as though she'd be sitting upon it herself.

But she was oh-so wrong. Even in my youngest years, there was one thing I understood perfectly. My mother was a mere commoner who'd gained a connection to the royal family by way of an accident. She was the lowest of the low and deserved to be walked all over. Yet she could never see herself for who she plainly was.

Eventually, she enacted her self-righteous plan to depose the king. She believed her actions were just. That it was her duty to install her daughter upon the throne. Of course, to anyone else looking on, she was nothing more than a usurper. There was no way she'd succeed. A glance through history could have told her as much. Never had a coup d'état staged by a shortsighted leader with no true following actually succeeded.

Still, she couldn't see things for what they plainly were. Her inevitable failure would lead to her death and the demise of her dreams. I tried to explain this to her time and time again. I told her not to do anything foolish. Yet each time, my mother replied, *"You must seize the throne. You must do it at all costs, no matter what it takes. No sacrifice is too great. You have to be the one to fulfill my dream. And now is the time."* And so my blinded mother chose to push forward.

Her words were a curse that she'd cast upon me since before I was born. She said that I must seize the throne at all costs...and she was right. I deserved it, I was worthy, and I would take it. She said that no sacrifice was too great...and she was right. I would use whatever means necessary, cutting down whomever stood between me and the crown. She said that I had to be the one to fulfill her dream...and she was right. This was the time. And so I chose to sacrifice her—more specifically, to hand her over to the prime minister and my father.

Thus my mother was slated to be executed for inciting a coup against the royal family. After being sold out by a key figure of the insurrection, there was too much evidence against her. All that remained for her was punishment.

Meanwhile, I was taken in by my father for choosing loyalty to the crown. The prime minister opposed it, but my father then announced the existence of his daughter Leyfa to the public.

This wasn't out of any paternal sense of attachment, of course. He'd merely determined it would be less trouble to officially acknowledge me than let someone else with the wherewithal to start a coup run amok. The fool. Little did he know I'd yet to give up on the throne. I wasn't free of my mother's curse. When he acknowledged me as his daughter, he was acknowledging my right to succeed him. I was thus one step closer to the crown. I'd done the right thing.

On the day of my mother's execution, I was granted one last opportunity to see her. With a blade against her neck, she said to me, *"I never should have given birth to you. None of this would have happened without you. I wouldn't have to die like a traitor. It's all your fault things went wrong."*

But she was wrong. She was the one who'd screwed things up.

"Without you, I never would've had any false hope of triumphing over them. Of being able to get what I want. If it weren't for you...!"

She was wrong. All I'd done was follow her orders. I was aiming for the throne at all costs—even the sacrifice of my own mother. I had to take the crown no matter what. That was what she'd told me. It was the entire reason I was born.

As a royal, it was my birthright to stand above everyone. That was how she'd raised me, and it was how I knew I'd done the right thing. Sentencing my own mother to death was correct as long as it led to me achieving our dream. So I had to become sovereign no matter what. I couldn't die before then. I would make any other sacrifice necessary. It was the only way to justify her death and my terrible actions.

I was present for her beheading. As her blood sprayed and I watched the light fade from her resentful, glaring eyes, I realized something. She was a fool. The worst kind of mother. She'd cursed me, and I didn't care... I loved her.

That was the day Leyfa Southerndall came into her own. She was no stranger to atrocity. She cut down anyone who challenged her. She even attempted to assassinate her older half sister. She became a tyrannical princess for the

history books. It was sad, but the dream of a mother who'd sought revenge against the world could only be fulfilled with her death.

*

"I can't die in a place like this..." Leyfa muttered, her fists clenched.

She was determined to take the throne at all costs. She would do it no matter what. It was her duty, her very *raison d'être*. Dying before then would mean she'd killed her mother for no reason—that her death was meaningless. So she couldn't accept defeat here, and yet...

"Is... Is this as far as I go?" she asked hoarsely as she beheld the disaster before her.

Contrary to Leyfa's hopes, the situation was only deteriorating. Mille was mortally wounded, Limuna had fled the dungeon, and the rest of her party already had one foot in the grave. Onz was grievously injured. Gilbert's specialty holy arts were sealed and he could barely stay on his feet now. That left Miya, but she was on borrowed time. Her magical energy was spent after repeatedly casting her spirit magic, and she was nearly out of arrows. She was still avoiding the boss's attacks thanks to Major Physical Boost, but she would never last against such an overwhelmingly powerful foe. Her head could go flying any second now.

Leyfa, meanwhile, was stuck on the sidelines. All she could do was watch, for everything below her right knee was gone and her left arm was bent at an unnatural angle. She'd lost enough blood that her body was slowly turning cold. There was so little life left in her that the enemy no longer considered her a target. It could finish her off whenever it pleased, so she'd been granted a temporary stay of execution. She'd be dead the instant the demon turned its attention to her again.

The princess had wanted to flee with Limuna. She'd never be able to conquer the dungeon or take the throne if she died here. As long as she survived, there was still a chance. Humans only got one shot at their dreams—that's what Leyfa believed after watching her mother die. She didn't believe in an afterlife. The concepts of heaven and reincarnation were just crutches for the living. People didn't have souls. Death was the end. That was it. There was nothing beyond

that.

Even if Leyfa ascended the throne now, there was no way for her mother to know her dream had been fulfilled. Nothing would change the fact she'd died resenting her daughter. That was why Leyfa was determined to take the crown not for her mother's sake, but for her own. It was her only recourse.

I wanted to run too. I wanted to run away and keep living. But I couldn't... I don't have the legs to carry me, and I don't have the energy anymore.

All but one of her party members were out of commission. Things were even worse now than when Limuna had first fled. Even if Leyfa had the means to make an escape, the demon wouldn't let her get away.

"It's not over yet! I'm just getting started!" Miya yelled in a throaty voice like she was cheering. Like she was summoning the very last of her energy.

She was clearly at her limit. She'd been fighting the demon solo for minutes now. In truth, it was unbelievable. A miracle, really, even considering her abilities. Miya was in the zone, overcoming personal wall after wall. She was performing exceptionally well under life-or-death circumstances. She'd certainly walk away from this fight a stronger hunter... That is, she *would* if she had the luxury of walking away from it at all. But this would be the end of her. She would die here. Her struggle was all for naught. Defeat was inevitable. Yet Miya was still fighting because Limuna had gone for help. That hope was the only thing keeping her afloat—but it was vain hope. She put too much faith in other people. Reality was far crueler than she imagined.

Leyfa didn't believe for a minute that Limuna would actually return with aid. She was just a mercenary with no real stake in the party. She could abandon them without a shred of guilt. That's what Leyfa would have done, so she was certain it was the choice Limuna had made. A mage named Courie had once told the princess, *"There are lots of people out there with bad intentions, sure, but I think it's easier to look for the good in them."* If asked, Leyfa would have said that commoners who saw the good in people were the most repulsive of all. How could they believe in people so innocently? She didn't understand, she didn't sympathize, and she didn't agree. Those who believed in the good of others had never seen what people were truly capable of.

Like the woman who lived to curse her daughter with her greed. The nobles who used that twisted woman to incite a civil war they couldn't win. The king who tried to make his mistress and their child disappear with money. The prime minister who tried to make them disappear by force. The queen who'd tried to shut away the poor child like a dirty secret. Her stepsisters who looked down on her while raising their hands against her. And the child herself...for killing her own mother in the name of ambition. No one was sacred. Human beings were just dirty, unsightly, malicious lumps of flesh. There was no good inside them. The world they populated was cruel beyond all salvation.

"We're going to make it! We're going to get out of this alive!" Miya shouted.

She let her pure, innocent wish fly with her lone remaining arrow. Arrows were an archer's lifeline, yet she'd used her last one without hesitation. The demon easily dodged the powerful shot by taking two steps back...but that small retreat was a victory to Miya, who hadn't yet lost hope. She threw down her bow and charged the enemy barehanded.

"Nothing you do...is going to make a difference..." the princess muttered.

Miya was a fool. She had to have known this was the end, yet she continued fighting. Her desperate struggle and hopeful blather were disgusting and, at the same time, enviable.

"There's no help coming... We're going to die here..."

The princess wasn't capable of believing in people the way Miya did. She couldn't live clinging to hope.

"We're all dead..."

In that moment, Leyfa found herself recalling the knight she'd kicked to the curb—Sofie. She'd been fiercely loyal but proved to be a worthless pawn in the end. The princess rarely regretted her actions, but taking in Sofie had been a complete mistake.

Leyfa only cared about her own gain, and she measured people by how much closer they could get her to the throne. She'd deemed Sofie would be useful to that end and indebted her into service. Or so she'd thought. Looking back on it now, things were less certain. Had she really extended Sofie a hand out of

sentimentality? Because Sofie hailed from circumstances not unlike her mother's? Perhaps it was all because she wanted to see Sofie lose herself the same way her mother had...or perhaps because she wanted to see her choose a different path. The princess couldn't deny that possibility. She'd made an exception to her own rules and paid the price in the form of acquiring a worthless pawn that she'd then had to discard personally.

Leyfa didn't inherently regret casting Sofie aside. It was an act of necessity. Having Sofie in her service now wouldn't have prevented the Legion's demise on floor 21. In fact, without Miya, the princess never would've had time to reminisce about Sofie before her end. This way, at least, the knight had been spared the same fate.

She probably resents me. Surely she's holding a grudge over her dismissal. That's fine. Whether she hates me or not, as long as she's alive... I never wanted to kill anyone like I did with my mother again. Experiencing that pain once was enough.

All Leyfa could do for the pitiful knight who'd served her for half her life was pray. Pray that she'd be able to defeat the demon who killed her. That she'd be able to reach the furthest depths of the dungeon that Leyfa had failed to see.

"I can still...keep going!"

Miya evaded a slashing swing from the demon by a hair's breadth. Any normal person would've been sent flying by the impact that followed, but Miya was able to weather it with Major Physical Boost.

"I can still fight...!"

She made a beeline for the boss, but was thrown up into the air. It was a sudden kick from the demon, which had so far been relying entirely on its sword. Miya never saw the attack coming and took it dead-on. She let out a wordless scream as she flew through the darkness in an arc. She'd long surpassed her physical limits, and after suffering such a mighty blow, her body was giving out in spite of her will to fight.

She slammed helplessly into the ground, and when the dust cleared, Leyfa saw her lying motionless with her eyes open. She was alive but no longer had the strength to get up. Both Miya and her opponent understood the situation.

The demon ceased its brutal flurry of attacks and leisurely sauntered toward her.

It's over...

Leyfa, too, understood what was about to come. Her final moments were passing before her like the last grains of sand falling from an hourglass. This was the end; the slaughter would now begin. The demon would go around finishing off the incapacitated Legionnaires to claim a brutal, bloody victory.

The only thing awaiting us, the defeated, is certain death.

The demon exhaled loudly as it walked toward Miya first, step by step. In a few short moments, she'd be within sword's reach.

It's over. It's all over. My journey to the throne. This meaningless life. Everything.

"Sorry, Leyfa... I can't move anymore..." Miya began sobbing. Were they tears of frustration? Or fear?

You don't have to apologize to me for anything. We weren't that close.

"I'm sorry I couldn't keep my promise... Even though I said I'd hold out until help came... Even though I said we'd conquer the dungeon together..."

What a fool. This isn't her fault. It was my own doing. If only I hadn't set my sights on dungeon conquest... If only I had prepared better for floor 21... If only the boss's first wave of attacks hadn't taken me out... If only I'd abandoned the throne... If only I hadn't killed my mother... I should have died with her. That way, this story would have ended peacefully without Miya or anyone else being killed.

"Sorry..."

It was too late now. The demon's sword came swinging down. In her final moments, Miya looked at Leyfa with her brilliant blue eyes. There was no anger or bitterness in them. Leyfa knew it wasn't the time or place for such a thought, but they struck her as beautiful.

I won't look away. As with my mother, I'll burn the end of her life into me. That is the least I owe her for bringing on her death. It will be my final

responsibility for my failure here...and my failure to fulfill my mother's dream.

The sinister purple glow of the blade drew close, cleaving a deadly path. That was the end...

“Spell Shot!”

Until *he* appeared from the shadows in a burst of wind.



A Fated Showdown, a Fight for Revenge, and an Impossible Dream

The instant we hit floor 21, I sprinted ahead of the group with Shadow Runner. Our goal was to rescue the Princess's Legion, and that was going to be a race against time. A nearly hobbled party wouldn't be able to hold their own against the boss for long. How quickly could I get there? Would I make it in time? That was the critical question, and speed would be the key to saving Miya and Leyfa.

Without Jin, I was the fastest person in the party. I could also see the enemy's position and the route there in my head. The path was simple enough, so I took off and left the Arrivers in the dust. Limuna had Mapping too, so I was sure she'd show them the way.

It was the right call. When I saw Miya beneath the descending blade, I believed that with all my heart. I activated Spell Shot without a moment's doubt. The blow, accelerated by Shadow Runner, slammed into the demon's side and completely melted away its arm.

Whoa... I should've expected as much from one of Erin's full-power spells.

"Note..."

I could hear the weak mumble of my childhood friend. Thank goodness she was still alive. I'd made it in time.

"What are you lying there for? Kind of a dangerous spot for a nap."

There were so many things I wanted to say, but I ended up cracking a joke. At the end of the day, I wasn't very forthright. I should have said something like, "I'm so glad you're alive. It's a relief I made it in time. Are you okay? What would I have done if you died?!" Something along those lines. But because the words I wanted wouldn't leave my mouth, I'd ended up teasing her instead.

"That's the first thing you have to say? Ha..." Miya forced a laugh.

Can't argue there. What am I doing, really?

Still, it wasn't exactly the *wrong* thing to say to her. Miya and I weren't teammates anymore; we were rivals. I'd given up my crush on her and released her from our childhood promise in exchange for one to meet again after we'd conquered the dungeon. In a way, this was the perfect reunion.

"If you've got something to complain about, stand up and say it," I told her. "Sorry, but I'm not good enough to fight this guy while protecting you."

The demon roared as it got some distance from us. A spell circle appeared where its left arm had been, rapidly growing a new limb.

"It can regenerate too? What a pain..." I muttered to myself.

An injured opponent would have been much easier to take down, but this was the boss of floor 21. It easily had the power to crush all our hopes.

"I can't stand, Note..."

"Say, uh, Miya, now's not the time to be joking around..."

"I'm not joking! I gave everything I had! I was fighting all by myself before you got here! Show a little more sympathy! Tell me I did a good job!"

"Huh? *That's* what you're getting mad about?!"

"I've made up my mind! I'm not moving one bit until you tell me I did good! I won't even lift a finger!"

"Fine..." I sighed. "You did well. Thanks for holding out this long. I'm really glad you're alive." This time, I was genuinely able to say what I'd wanted to. I could hear Miya swallowing her breath. When she remained on the ground, I continued, "Umm, Miya... I praised you already, so please get up soon..."

"Sorry, Note... Now I'm too relieved to find the energy to get up..."

"Excuse me?"

"I said I'm so relieved that I can't stand up!"

You sound awfully pleased with yourself, but you need to get out of here before the boss attacks again...

"Argh, fine!" I ruffled my hair and replied, "All right. Just lie there then. I'll

make sure his sword doesn't reach you."

There, I took a step forward. My goal had been to focus exclusively on evading the demon's attacks while buying time for the others to arrive, but this meant a change of plans. I'd have to go after the demon and distract it entirely.

Fortunately, the demon already had its sights on me after my Spell Shot. I only had one blast of that left, which wasn't a very reassuring number, but I only had what I had. I'd be forced to make do with the cards in my hand.

Lowering my center of gravity, I exhaled and relaxed in preparation to use Shadow Runner. We were up against the boss of floor 21, and I was the only fighter on our side. I had to keep everyone alive until the rest of the Arrivers caught up. It wouldn't be easy. This must have been how Jin felt back then. He'd taken on this demon alone so the rest of us could get away.

I was in pretty good shape, though. As right as rain, really. The Princess's Legion had moved this grudge match up, but I was amped to finally be facing this fated foe. I felt lighter than normal. I probably even could've given Jin a run for his money.

"Shadow Runner!"

Got him! No sooner had I activated the art than I was already upon the boss. I was moving at hypersonic speeds that took even the demon by surprise.

It was quick to respond with its sword. Evading the swing was simple enough. I changed my approach and sidestepped away, getting distance from the falling blade. It slammed into the ground, splitting the floor and sending rubble flying. I was long gone by then, though, so it made no difference to me. I knew its attacks were dangerous to dodge at close range.

I'd successfully evaded the first blow, but the boss wasn't looking to fail a second time. As soon as I ducked behind a pillar, it leaped into the air and took a second swing, channeling its momentum into a horizontal sweep. I managed to change directions in time by kicking off the pillar, which then took the demon's attack and shattered into dust.

"Damn, it's strong..." I let out a dry laugh as I observed my opponent's strength.

If I'd hesitated for even a moment, I would've been dead meat. This battle was so fierce that I wouldn't have been surprised to go down in the blink of an eye. However, I'd already eluded three blows. In the past, that would've taken absolutely everything I had. I'd definitely grown since those days.

"Next up!"

I started running at the demon. In order to distract it from Miya and her party, I had no choice but to press the offensive. I gasped when I saw what it had in store for me—three flurries of rapid thrusts. Just as I thought I'd evaded them, the demon drew its sword back to strike again and took a firm step forward. A downward swing followed, locked on to a certain figure...

"Phantom!"

That shadowy figure, however, had no physical form. The demon merely slashed through empty air. I immediately entered a Sinking Walk stance to duck below the following sweep. As I was playing the various cards in my hand, the demon was gradually learning how to react to my arts.

I evaded an attack from a crouched stance next. I'd now used every evasive art in my repertoire except Stream. It was too risky. Stream required getting close to the enemy's attack, which would mean entering the range of the sword's shock wave. It was also dangerous to keep using the same arts. I couldn't imagine the boss falling for the same tricks twice.

"No choice, I guess... Blackslide!"

This one wasn't an evasive art. It was a maneuver art used to get behind an enemy with an impossible-to-predict trajectory. And once I was behind the boss, there was only one thing to do.

"Spell Shot!"

I used up my last bullet. There was no time to be shy about resources. The blast opened a hole in the demon's chest so large that I could peer through it into the darkness of floor 21 on the other side.

"It'd be too easy if that was it..."

The demon began chanting a spell, and the wound wriggled closed with

magical energy. A hole like that would've spelled instant death for a person, but apparently demons weren't fazed by having their hearts blown out. This revelation was enough to make anyone despair.

The demon flapped its wings as it healed, lowering its center of gravity and leaping up into the air in one bound. A rapid, furious swoop followed. It threw itself at me with far more power than before. Even if I used Shadow Runner and Withdraw together, evading this would be difficult. And even if I got out of the way, it would leave Miya and the others exposed... But everything was fine. It was still too early to give up.

"The rest is up to you!" I called into the darkness.

An answer came in the form of a brandished sword. "Flash Draw!" Blade clashed against blade, the demonic one aglow with a sinister spell and the cursed one alight with a wicked fire.

"Sorry for the wait," announced our party leader.

After he deflected the demon's attack, they both took their distance from one another. Locking blades was a good taste of their strength, so they each eyed the other carefully now. Force braced himself for the demon's next move.

"Seriously, how slow can you be?" I asked.

"Shut it. We hurried as fast as we could," he snapped back.

"You barely made it in time!"

"It is what it is, man. We had to move at Neme's pace. There's no way of knowing what monsters might be around, so we couldn't just leave her behind."

"I guess you're right..."

"Anyways, I knew you'd be able to handle yourself. I had faith in you."

"Not sure if I'm happy to hear that."

"You lived up to it. You should be proud."

After saying that, Force briefly cast a glance over his shoulder. Everyone else had arrived—Erin, Roslia, Neme, Sofie, and Limuna, who had been guiding them in the lead.

“Princess Leyfa?!” Sofie spotted the heavily wounded Leyfa and ran straight for her. “Your leg! Are you okay?!”

“Do I look okay to you?” Leyfa sighed tiredly. “Why did you even come here?”

“That’s... I came to save you.”

“I’m asking *why*. You have more reason to scorn me than to save me. You no longer serve me, after all.”

“I...”

“So what are you doing? Why would you save someone like me?”

“Isn’t it obvious...?” Sofie raised her head. Tears fell from the corners of her eyes. “Because you saved me, Princess Leyfa. When I was all alone. When everyone else discarded me. You were the only one. The only one who reached out to me when my mother and father died.”

“That wasn’t my intention—”

“I don’t care what you intended! If it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t be alive right now! So I decided I’d repay you with my life. Isn’t that reason enough?!”

“But I cast you aside.”

“That doesn’t matter... Even if you didn’t need my help, I’d do everything I could to save you. That’s what I decided.”

The two women stared at each other for several long moments.

“Enough. Do what you will.” Leyfa folded first. “You really are a worthless pawn. You don’t listen to what you’re told, you act without orders...”

“I’m sorry.”

“That’s why I’m not showing you gratitude as a tool, but as a fellow human being. Thank you. If you hadn’t come to save me, I would be dead.”

“Your...Highness...”

“Thank you, truly. For coming to save someone like me.”

That was the moment Sofie finally received her reward for all her long years of loyal service and unrequited dedication. She and Leyfa finally connected. This

was the day Sofie Deanlurk was truly saved.

“I should be the one thanking you. Without you, Your Highness...”

“What are you crying for? I’m praising you for once. You should be pleased.”

“I am. I’m so happy...that I was able to rescue you. These are tears of joy.”

“How silly... Truly...”

Leyfa shakily lifted her right hand to cup Sofie’s cheek—a gesture that carried far more meaning than simply wiping away her tears. If possible, I wanted to watch over this touching scene forever. I wanted to celebrate Sofie’s joy. But floor 21 wasn’t the place for that. The demon that had killed Jin was right in front of us, and Force was facing it alone at the moment.

“You ready, Sofie?” I called.

“Yes. I can defeat anything right now,” she replied.

Her sparkling eyes turned to the boss of floor 21, and just like that, she was in battle mode. We were all in place now. All six Arrivers against the demon that had taken Jin from us. The boss fight was about to begin in earnest.

“It seems like that glowing sword is what’s sealing the use of holy arts,” Sofie reported, revealing what she’d learned via High Appraisal. “As long as we break it, Neme should be able to use her healing magic. Then we can save Princess Leyfa.”

That was great news. Once we broke the sword, the demon would only be half as intimidating.

“Erin!” I called.

“I know!” she called back. It seemed she’d already gotten the message, as she was pooling magical energy into her staff.

“Force and Sofie, you distract the boss. Everyone else, get the Princess’s Legion out of here.”

It was time for me to switch roles. I wouldn’t be of any use after expending both Spell Shots anyway. Roslia and Neme couldn’t fight properly without their holy techniques either, so the rescue operation would be up to the three of us.

“Force, Sofie! You two do whatever you can to hold that thing in place. Then I can destroy its sword,” Erin stated confidently. Her hair was fluttering with the flow of magic around her.

“You don’t want me to smash the thing for you?” Force asked.

“Don’t bother. I only need one spell to do it.”

“Hey now, let’s not exaggerate.”

“It’s not an exaggeration. It’s the truth.” With that, she activated her spell. “Transfer Zone!”

A transparent cube manifested in the air. Any nonliving thing inside it would be shunted through space. It was the strongest spell conceivable against inanimate objects, and Erin sent it forward with the intent to swallow the demon’s sword whole. However, the demon—the gatekeeper of the dungeon’s end floors—evaded it with a spin and closed in on her.

“Not a chance!” Force jumped between them. Magic sword clashed with cursed blade once more. “Whoa!”

Erin’s Transfer Zone hooked back around. It only affected nonliving matter, so it passed through Force’s body on its way to the demon. He shuddered in shock, and the demon seemed to sense the incoming danger. It lowered its sword, and both sides retreated in a rather anticlimactic end to their clash.

“Hey! Something strange just passed through me!”

“Don’t worry about it!”

“What do you mean?! What was that?!”

Force was bewildered by the spell he’d never seen before, but Erin easily dismissed his confusion. “It’s fine! You just focus on stopping that sword! I’ll send it flying in an instant!”

“You’ll send *what* flying?!”

“The sword, obviously!”

“I’m still not following...” For Force, who hadn’t seen how Erin had made a name for herself in the Seventh Sage Selection, Transfer Zone was beyond his

comprehension. He gave up on trying to figure it out and turned back to the boss. “I just have to stop the sword, right? Then you can destroy it?”

“That’s what I’ve been saying all along!”

“Your explanation was kinda lacking...”

Force looked displeased, but his trust in Erin won out. When she said she’d do something, she meant it. Despite her recklessness and impulsiveness, she was good for her word. She was a genius mage who could back up her big talk, after all.

“All right! Let’s do this!”

Erin cast one Transfer Zone after another. The demon twisted this way and that, nimbly weaving between the incoming cubes. That was when Sofie made her move.

“Fuerte-Tierra-Cárcel.”

She petitioned the spirits to conjure an earthen prison around the demon. It tried to slip away with its incredible speed, but Erin’s barrage of Transfer Zones hampered its movement. Its right foot ended up caught. More transparent cubes quickly closed in on it.

“You did it!” Force cheered as the cubes passed through the demon and its sword. But nothing in particular happened. The boss simply tore its leg free and leaped into the air. “Hey, that didn’t do anything!”

“Bad timing! I’ll nail the next one!”

Transfer Zone was an incredibly difficult spell to use. Its power was second to none, but if a living creature entered its area of effect by even a hair, it would fail to activate. That was its biggest drawback. In order to match the demon’s maneuverability, Erin was casting Transfer Zones quickly. Thanks to that, her window of opportunity to land the spell was short. She’d just missed her chance this time. Transfer Zone was a sure win against unmoving objects in a Decafight, but it was tough to use against mobile targets like the boss. It was guaranteed to work when it hit though, so we had to keep trying.

“So get out there! Quit complaining and hold it in place already!”

Erin spurred on our front line as she cast more Transfer Zones. This round of cubes was slightly smaller—they couldn't destroy as much in one go, but Erin would have an easier time targeting the sword specifically. It was a gutsy move. Was she going on instinct? The demon was still wary of her innocent-looking cubes. It used both rapid footwork and flight to dodge them, and whenever it had a spare moment, it would take a potshot at Erin. But the silver-haired mage had two solid walls to protect her—Force and Sofie deflected each attack that came her way.

“Now!”

When Force blocked the demon's blade again, it was momentarily stopped in place. Erin sent a Transfer Zone cube zooming after it. Just as I thought she was about to succeed, the demon suddenly leaned forward. With its body in the spell's zone now, it failed to activate again.

“Y-You...!”

Was that dumb luck on the demon's part? No, that'd be too much of a coincidence. I didn't know how, but the demon had already seen through Erin's Transfer Zone. It had accurately parsed its strengths and weaknesses. It seemed we'd no longer be able to catch it by surprise. We had no recourse but to overwhelm it by force instead. Just as I was thinking that...

“Fuerte-Tierra-Pilar.”

A strike came from above. It was one of Sofie's spirit arts. She'd used the roof as a catalyst to conjure a pillar that crashed down into the demon's back. Not even the boss of floor 21 could withstand such a heavy blow while still off-balance from shifting its weight. It thrust its sword into the ground to stay upright—leaving the blade wide open.

“Good job, Sofie!” Erin's staff glowed. A perfect cube appeared in front of it. “Transfer Zone!”

The moment the cube came into contact with a section of the blade, they both disappeared as though they'd never existed. With its support now gone, the demon toppled to its knees under the crushing weight of the pillar. In an instant, the purple aura cloaking the area disappeared.

Someone was eagerly awaiting that moment—the priestess of the Arrivers.

“Saint’s Wonder!”

The miraculous spell Neme unleashed undid all the damage wrought by the demon’s blade. Leyfa’s severed leg was recovering before our eyes. Mille, who was barely clinging to life thanks to a magic artifact, began breathing normally. A powerful healing spell capable of bringing even those on the brink of death back to the land of the living... Not many people could cast something like that. It was a good reminder that Neme wasn’t just our party mascot, but a full-fledged member of the Arrivers.

Next came the sound of crumbling earth. Sofie’s pillar collapsed as the demon rose up. Its blue-black body began transforming. I could see its veins swell as the monster physically rearranged itself into a more streamlined physique with smaller wings. In their place, it now had much larger legs and talons that clawed into the ground. It looked like it was built to run down opponents with greater speed and force than before. The arms, which had formerly held its magic sword, were now glinting blades themselves. This was the boss’s second form—a transformation that optimized offense after losing its weapon.

An evil aura burst forth from its body. The moment I realized it was attacking, the demon had already kicked off the ground. It made a beeline for Erin— No, it was going for Neme. Rather than the mage who’d broken its sword, the demon had determined that the priestess with extraordinary holy magic was a bigger threat.

That caught us all off guard. Not just me, but Force, Sofie, and Roslia too. As we kicked ourselves for not being prepared...someone else made a move.

“Hammer of Judgment!”

Neme and Roslia weren’t the only ones who’d been sidelined without their holy arts. Moreover, the Arrivers weren’t the only ones facing the demon now. The man who’d landed a hit heavy enough to rip open the demon’s torso was none other than the strongest war priest, Gilbert Einzach.

“You have my thanks, Arrivers.”

In one hand, he wielded a silver-white mace as big as a person. He was

shrouded in a holy aura as he channeled more of his magic power. And behind him, his compatriots rose one after another. Thanks to Neme's healing spell, the members of the Princess's Legion had recovered enough to rejoin the battle.

With Enemy Search, I could sense that the demon had entered its second form the moment the magic sword was destroyed—but the Arrivers were prepared to take it on now that holy arts were back in play. Furthermore, the Princess's Legion would be joining the fight now. It felt like we couldn't lose.

The first round had been a battle between me and time. The second was between Erin and the demon's sword. And now the third was upon us—the final tag-team round with the Arrivers and the Princess's Legion against the boss of floor 21.

*

How long had it been since the boss battle on floor 21 began? At least half an hour had elapsed since my party arrived on the scene, so adding that to how long the Princess's Legion had held out on their own, the fight had been ongoing for over an hour now.

The demon was already out of magical energy and could no longer regenerate. An open wound gaped on its back where Force had lopped off its left wing. Its face was smashed in from a blow of Gilbert's mace. The left half of its body was seared from Erin's fire spell. One of Mille's magic swords was still sticking out of its back. Roslia had clipped the claws on both its hands with her holy sword. And Onz had crushed its right foot with his bare hands.

In other words, the boss was spent. It was battered so badly that it would fall with one more blow. But we'd also expended a lot to get to this point. Neme and Roslia only had enough mana left to save for an emergency, and Force could no longer ignore the corrosive effects of Purgatory's black flames. The Princess's Legion wasn't faring much better either. Leyfa had exhausted her supply of magical items, and Mille didn't have the energy left to create more magic swords. No matter how many healing spells were cast on them, Onz and Gilbert were hitting their physical limits.

"You okay?" I asked the half-elf girl beside me.

She exhaled and clenched her fists. “Yeah. I’m out of arrows, but Erin’s spell helped me recover some magical energy. I can still fight. You?”

“I reloaded my Spell Shots, so I can actually fight now. I’m raring to go too, so let’s do this.”

The Arrivers and the Princess’s Legion were fighting together, hand in hand. Our initial plan had been to rush the boss together with all our might, but after considering its unholy healing powers, we’d switched over to chipping away at its magical energy instead. Since we had the advantage in numbers, we were rotating our active combatants to keep up the pressure and conserve our strength. Several people would take turns fighting while the others regrouped. Force and Gilbert were on the front lines now, and Miya and I would be next in line with the support of Erin’s infinite magical energy.

Each party had been rotating their players differently, so this would be my first round partnering with Miya. Our first real double-team. Both born and raised in Changs, we’d set out into the world to become adventurers together. We’d been separated and reunited, and even done an adventuring stint in the capital with Roslia. This wasn’t our first time fighting a monster side by side, but it would be the first time we’d truly fought together.

Note Athlon of the Arrivers and Miya Line of the Princess’s Legion... Childhood friends who’d unfortunately gone their separate ways, but had never given up on their dream to become top-tier adventurers. Sure, this was a far cry from what we’d pictured as kids. That dream might never come true how we’d thought it would...but perhaps this double-team battle was a gift from God.

It gave us the chance to stand shoulder to shoulder against a formidable enemy of the dungeon’s end floors—something I’d imagined as a kid. If I looked past everything that had happened to get here and clipped out just this moment, it wasn’t too far of a stretch to say that my dreams had come true after all. I didn’t think I was the only one who felt that way either.

Miya looked at me and smiled. “I guess we can play clean-up crew on our turn, then.”

“Yeah, let’s defeat the boss together.”

“Don’t get in my way, you hear me?”

“Right back at you.”

Bantering back and forth with her like this was fun. It felt like proof we were finally on equal footing. *This* was what I’d so desperately dreamed of achieving in the past.

“Force!” I called.

“Gilbert!” Miya called too.

“Switch with us!”

Our voices echoed through the dimly lit temple. The best dream of all was about to begin.

“Shadow Runner.”



A stark black shadow cut across the floor, faster than light. I should've been fatigued after fighting for so long, yet my body was light. I felt like I could go anywhere right now. I evaded a horizontal slash of the demon's arm, then its fire breath. A beam that shot from its eyes and a stabbing thrust from its tail missed me as well.

"Esmeralda-Agua-Flecha."

I could hear Miya incanting her spirit magic. Water gathered in her right hand and swirled into the shape of an arrow. The boss turned to her, its attention naturally drawn to the mana she was using.

I've got this. Not so fast! Stream!

I then activated the art I'd hesitated to use all this time. It closed the distance on an enemy in the blink of an eye. In other words, it immediately threw you into the danger zone. A single misstep spelled doom. And when facing a boss of such physical strength, it was especially dangerous to get close thanks to the shock wave of its colossal attacks. That was why I hadn't used the art until now, but in the moment, I was brimming with confidence—confidence that paid off.

With Stream, I evaded the demon's swing at the last second, staggering the monster for a brief moment. And my childhood friend wasn't about to let even the slightest opportunity slip past her.

"Arrow of Destruction!"

The watery bolt Miya had conjured pierced the demon's body—a nearly fatal shot. Now was my chance to finish it.

"Hoo..."

I turned my right hand up, inhaling sharply. My back was arced like a bowstring. I focused my mind on controlling my racing heart. Then I dismantled the trap magic in my right glove, firing the spell it contained.

"Spell Shot!"

This was my signature art, combining Palm Shot with Erin's magic. When the demon took it at point-blank range, the upper half of its torso was blown clean off. And without the ability to regenerate itself, its black flesh simply crumbled

away. It was over in a flash, a simple moment for such a long battle.

“Did we do it...?”

It was a little anticlimactic, in all honesty. The room was veiled in silence. No one replied. A cloud of dust dispersed into the air without a sound. Slowly, quietly, realization sunk in on us all. Had we really just felled the boss of floor 21? Perhaps, at long last, we finally had.

This foul creature had stolen one of our own, my mentor Jin. It had cast us all into the depths of despair and almost ended the party for good. This monster had nearly killed my adventuring career entirely...and we’d finally defeated it. The Arrivers could now move on. Past floor 21. Deeper into the end floors. We could finally break new ground for the first time in over a year.

Cheers resounded from both the Arrivers and the Princess’s Legion around me, the door to floor 22 opened...and I realized that my dreams really had come true.

To True Belonging

The several days following our turbulent battle on floor 21 passed rapidly. I was only just now settling down after all the chaos and excitement. You see, in order to recover after our impromptu expedition—both mentally and physically—the Arrivers had decided to take a short break from the dungeon. Today I'd done some light training to keep from getting rusty, taken a shower, and was now putting my feet up in the living room.

"Do you have a moment?" someone asked.

It was Sofie. I looked up to see her in her usual maid outfit, standing with perfect posture.

"What is it?" I asked back.

"I'd like you to come with me."

"For what? You going to confess your feelings for me or something?" I joked as payback for last time.

Yet she replied dead seriously, "There's absolutely no chance of that. Just think about it rationally. Why would I fall in love with someone like you? Are you actually a narcissist, Note?"

I stared at her blankly. I was only kidding around. I didn't realize I'd be opening the door for her to tear me down like that... After being freed from her sense of obligation, Sofie had really stopped holding back with me. That was a good thing, of course, but at times like this, I kinda missed the old Sofie.

In fact, you're the one who has the wrong idea here! I should be ripping you a new one!

"Well, all joking aside..."

Of course, I was too nice to raise any objections out loud. It totally wasn't because I was afraid of upsetting her further and suffering whatever other abuse she had in store for me. Really. I wasn't terrified of girls cutting me down

to size. Honest.

“Where are we going?”

“Princess Leyfa summoned me. She said she wants to talk.”

“This doesn’t have to do with floor 21, does it?”

“No.”

Technically, the Arrivers had rescued the Princess’s Legion the other day. When that happened, it was customary to compensate the rescuing party with a reward, much the same way that Jin had paid the parties who’d joined in the search effort to save me and Erin when we were stranded in the dungeon. You could be a stickler about it, but it was socially unacceptable to slight a party you knew well.

That was why Force and I had handled the negotiations with the Legion after the fact. Surprisingly, Leyfa had agreed without protest. Given our history, I’d expected her to put up more of a fight, but she seemed genuinely grateful for what we did. She even ended up offering us several times more than what we’d expected. That included a promise to make us nobles when she took the throne, but we naturally turned down such an unsettling offer. In the end, we’d chickened out of accepting money from her and retreated after agreeing to take several nifty-looking magic artifacts.

We weren’t interested in any more bad blood with the Princess’s Legion anyway. So in order to convey the Arrivers’ intention for a clean slate moving forward, we put aside our greed. And, perhaps because of that, Leyfa no longer seemed to bear the same kind of ill will toward me or the party. If anything, it felt like she’d forgiven us after the events on floor 21.

It thus seemed safe to assume the discord between the Arrivers and the Princess’s Legion was now over, which meant Sofie had been summoned for a different reason altogether.

“I wonder what she wants to discuss...” I mused.

“I don’t know myself,” said Sofie.

“But she wants to talk to both of us, huh? I can’t imagine what about...”

“Actually, she only summoned me.”

Oh? Interesting. Why had Sofie invited me along, then?

“So where are you taking me?” I asked.

“To Princess Leyfa.”

“Why? She didn’t ask to see me, right?”

“I’m worried about going alone. I don’t know what she’ll say. So I’d like you to come with me, Note.”

Here I was getting dragged into another mess. No matter how indebted the princess felt toward us now, approaching her was still scary... Who knew what it would take to set her off again? If possible, I would’ve simply preferred to let sleeping dogs lie.

“Why me? Erin would go if you asked her,” I volunteered.

“If I took her, things would definitely get ugly,” Sofie countered.

“Good point...”

She was totally right. It seemed Sofie now had a pretty good grasp of the party and everyone’s personalities.

“Besides, you’re my accomplice. You’re supposed to help me out.”

“Awfully convenient for you to bring that up at a time like this...”

“It’s just that I feel like I won’t owe you anything for helping me out. We’re partners in crime, after all. There’s no one else I can ask.”

“Well, if you insist...”

I figured gaining Sofie’s trust was a good thing. I felt like I was going easy on her, but I couldn’t help myself. Maybe I was more of a softie than I thought.

“Good. Now get ready. We’ll leave as soon as you are.”

“Huh?! You want to go *right now*?!”

“Of course. Is that a problem?”

“I mean, it’s not like I have plans, but I need to prepare my heart for this...”

“You don’t. You just have to follow me and watch, and preferably provide support when I need it.”

“See, that’s not just following and watching...”

“And, if things end badly, I’d like you to console me while I’m down.”

“You even need support afterward?!” I had the feeling it was just Sofie’s pessimism telling her that things would go poorly, but as a pessimistic person myself, I didn’t have much room to talk. “Listen, if my role’s that important, I really would like time to prepare...”

“If we delay it too long, my heart won’t hold up. It’s better to get these things over with.”

“Ah, so you’re concerned about *your* heart.”

Sofie was going to see the liege who’d dismissed her. Of course she was nervous. I didn’t think things were going to be that difficult, but as earnest as Sofie was, she was naturally taking this all rather seriously.

“All right. Let’s go right away,” I suggested.

“Really...?”

“You’re the one who said we should, no?”

“I did...but going immediately is nerve-racking...”

“Which is it?!”

“Right away, please.”

After all her hesitation, Sofie chose to depart forthwith. Fortunately, I was ready to go in the clothes I was already wearing. Taking care of this sooner rather than later would be better for all of us, Sofie foremost.

“Let’s go,” I said.

“Wait a minute,” she replied.

“What is it now?”

Sofie grabbed my arm as I tried to walk off. “My nerves are giving me a stomachache. Can I go to the bathroom?”

“Do what you need to...”

We didn’t leave HQ for another half an hour.

*

“Um... Pardon me...”

After we rang the bell to her hotel room, the Tyrant Princess herself opened the door, glaring at me in discontent.

“I say...” she began.

“Uh-huh?”

“Why are *you* here?”

“I’ve been wondering that myself.”

It’s not like I wanted to be doing this. I was the one who’d actually pressed the doorbell. I was actually the one standing at the door... All while the person the princess actually wanted to see was hiding behind me.

“You really are useless. Don’t bring along third parties to our business.”

“I got scolded because of you,” Sofie muttered to me.

What part of this is my fault? This is all your doing.

“Well, whatever,” the princess acquiesced. “Nothing to be done about it now that you’re here. Come in, I guess.”

At least she didn’t send me away. Sofie and I thus entered her room.

“Ah...”

I immediately made eye contact with Miya, who immediately looked away. She didn’t say a word either. It was a little disheartening to get the cold shoulder like that, but we’d promised not to see each other until one of us cleared the dungeon. Our early reunion on floor 21 must have been awkward for her.

It was just the four of us present. No one else from the Legion was there. Leyfa elegantly took her seat, and a heavy silence hung over the room.

Sofie whispered into my ear, “Note, ask Her Highness what she wanted to

discuss.”

“Why me? You can ask that much yourself.”

“You really think I can do that when I’m this nervous?”

“Well, you sure had no problem ordering me around...”

Despite my exasperation, I turned to Leyfa. In order to settle this as soon as possible, *someone* had to take the initiative.

“What did you want to discuss, Princess Leyfa?” I asked.

“Why are *you* the one asking?”

“I wish I knew.”

I couldn’t even put up an argument. It was a damn good question.

Sofie then leaned in again and whispered, “Don’t do anything to anger Princess Leyfa.”

“I don’t really feel like I’m the one at fault here...”

I had plenty of gripes to register with the girl behind me who kept ordering me around. Namely that I could’ve avoided all this if she’d just stepped up to do it herself...

“May I get to the point now?” Leyfa asked, leaning on her elbow with a tired sigh.

Sofie nodded nervously.

“I intended to ask you this without Note Athlon present...” Leyfa started. “But first, let me say that I’m grateful you came to save me. I forgive all our past grievances, so there’s no need to be so nervous.”

“Yes, Your Highness!” Sofie responded in a high-pitched voice.

Leyfa continued with a strained smile, “Now, may I get to the heart of the matter?”

“As you wish, Your Highness!”

Leyfa then made a shocking proposal: “Sofie, would you come back to me?”

My eyes went wide. So did Sofie’s.

“When you say ‘come back,’ Your Highness...”

“I mean exactly that. If not for you, I’d be dead right now. So, to honor your actions, I’m offering you a chance to return to my service.” Leyfa paused there, shaking her head. “No, that’s not right. Let me rephrase—I’m asking you to return to me. Please come back.”

“You want me back...?”

“That’s right. It seems I need you around. You may be completely useless as a subordinate, but your value as a supporter of mine is irreplaceable. That’s what this incident has shown me.”

A palpable change had come over Leyfa. Who’d have thought that the Tyrant Princess herself would ever say such a thing?

“You don’t have to be an obedient knight. You don’t even have to be an attendant. Just stay by my side and support me.” This heartfelt request was out of character for Leyfa, but when I looked into her eyes, I could see that it was entirely genuine. “Depending on the circumstances, I may even allow you to rejoin the Princess’s Legion.”

“Rejoin the Legion? But...”

“Of course, that would mean the half-elf over there has to go. Just to balance the numbers.”

“Why me?!” Miya yelped, suddenly caught in the crossfire.

But Leyfa ignored her comedic squealing and continued, “It’s not a bad deal for you. When I ascend the throne, I’ll grant all your wishes...so return to me.”

Sofie quietly gasped. Those words were undoubtedly what she’d been longing to hear. This was like a dream come true for her. The master she’d been loyal to all this time was finally offering to take her back. I’d be sorry to see Sofie quit the Arrivers, but there’d be no stopping her from leaving now. She was at long last being rewarded for all she’d done. She was finally getting her happy ending, and in service of that, I was willing to let her go.

Or so I was thinking, when...

“I’m sorry, Your Highness. I can’t do that.”

“Huh?!” I gasped. It took me a long moment to process those words as a rejection.

In contrast to my surprise, however, Leyfa spoke calmly. “May I ask why?”

“Of course, Your Highness. I am honored by your offer. Overwhelmed, even. I could leap for joy right now.”

“Then all you have to do is say yes.”

“Even so, life with the Arrivers is really fun. Part of me doesn’t want that to end.”

I hadn’t realized Sofie thought so highly of us. Since when had the Arrivers become comparable to Leyfa in her mind?

“I don’t want to abandon my current life. That’s why I can’t accept your proposal.”

“I see...”

“But once we’ve cleared the dungeon... When that time comes, Your Highness, please! May I work under you again then?!”

Leyfa offered no reply.

“And, please, forgive me for making such a selfish request!”

“Hahh...” Leyfa sighed. While her tone made it sound like she was completely fed up, the look on her face told me otherwise. “Of course. I’m the one asking the favor here. You’re allowed that much selfishness.”

Leyfa was smiling. Seeing that must have filled Sofie with relief, for she fell to her knees sobbing.

“R-Really?!” she cried through the tears.

“Really. I wouldn’t lie about something so trivial.”

“Your Highness... Hic...”

“What now...?”

“Princess Leyfaaa!” She was bawling her eyes out. “Waaaaah!”



Leyfa smiled wryly at Sofie's wailing and walked over to pat her on the head. "What an ugly crying face..."

It was like the two of them were in their own world, happily enveloped in an inviolable holy aura. It was all Miya and I could do to watch over them quietly.

"They've completely forgotten we're here."

"All's well that ends well, right?"

Although we were completely left out, a warm feeling filled my heart.

*

"Are you sure about turning Princess Leyfa down?" I asked after we left the hotel room. I knew it was tactless of me, but I was more concerned about making sure Sofie had no regrets.

She nodded, her eyes still puffy from crying. "Yup. I stand by my decision. She already said I could come back to her once we've cleared the dungeon."

"All right."

I was relieved to hear the confidence in her voice. In that moment, I was truly glad I'd invited Sofie into the Arrivers.

"Let's go home," I said.

Feeling like the air had been cleared, we left the lobby and exited the building...where we ran into the two people we least expected to see.

"We've finally caught them! In the middle of a secret rendezvous, no less!"

"Note and Sofie are leaving a hotel together...?"

It was Roslia in her hat-and-sunglasses reporter getup with Erin, who looked like her soul was leaving her body through her mouth. Why were the two of them here?! And what were they doing?!

"You two look confused, so allow me to explain," Reporter Roslia announced, ignoring the half-dead Reporter Erin. "It was a peaceful afternoon on a day off when a certain man and woman sneaked out of the house. All this, mind you, after they'd spent a suspicious night together in the dungeon. Talk about a juicy scoop! We had no choice *but* to follow them! My journalistic spirit demanded

it!”

I was struck dumb, but my life was full of awkward moments like this. I was already used to them and no longer had the energy to be surprised by every little thing.

You’re not even a real reporter, Roslia...

I guess she just enjoyed this kind of thing. She’d gone all out back when we were tailing Jin too.

“What do you think, Reporter Erin? We’ve now acquired irrefutable proof. You tried to deny that Note would ever do such a thing earlier, so how are you feeling?”

“I want to die. The end.”

“You heard it right here on scene!”

Yeah, Roslia was definitely enjoying herself right now. Rather than interrogating me over a crime she knew I was innocent of, she was instead having fun tormenting Erin—who, with all two of her brain cells, fell for it splendidly.

“So, Sofie, what’d you do in that hotel room?” Roslia asked impishly.

“I cried a lot,” she answered.

“Hey, don’t give them the wrong idea!” I fussed.

She’d definitely done that on purpose. Sofie knew exactly what she was saying.

“I’m going to die... When I’m reborn...I want to be a mere weed...” the weird shadow standing next to Roslia muttered.

Weeds have it rough too, you know? Enjoy being human a little more, will you?

“All right! That’s one rival down. All that’s left now is Miya,” muttered the reporter with ultramarine hair in an almost equally unsettling fashion, all while pumping her fist.

You’re being written off, Erin! Better hurry up and show some signs of life!

Why had Miya's name come up just now anyway? There was even less chance of anything happening with her than with Sofie. Especially considering her opinion of me.

"Nice one, Sofie!" Roslia cheered.

"I don't know what I did, but I'm happy to be of service."

"I'll be counting on you to help me take down Miya too."

"I have my own score to settle with that half-elf for removing me from Princess Leyfa's service. I'll gladly help you defeat her."

The normally docile Sofie's motivated for once! You'd better make a run for it, Miya!

I wanted to go warn her straight away, but I figured these two would only follow me and cause more trouble. My childhood friend had grown into a great fighter. Surely she could handle two assassins on her own... Yeah, that's what I told myself. Even though I could only picture Roslia bullying her to tears.

"Don't go too far, you two," I ultimately said, deciding to leave it at a light warning.

Sorry for being a heartless childhood friend, Miya...

"Anyway, Sofie," Roslia piped up, "you sure look refreshed. Like a weight's been lifted off your shoulders."

"Do I?"

"Looks that way to me. What'd you *really* do with Note?"

"Hmm... I wonder."

"What an unexpected response! She's not denying it! Has the impossible truly happened?!" Roslia suddenly started sweating at the brow, exchanging a panicked look with the half-dead Erin.

She'd set this whole trap, so what was she doing falling for it? I guess this is what they mean when they say "hoisted by your own petard."

"What do we do?! What do we do?! Did we just get our man stolen from us?! I've done the stealing before, but this is my first time on the receiving end!"

What are you supposed to do when this happens?! What is this tightness in my chest?!"

"Find your inner peace... Become a mere weed..."

Roslia's just reaping what she's sown. Don't convert her to your weird weed cult, Erin. We don't need a new religion, and we sure as heck don't need two weeds in the party.

"Is that what I should've done when everything was so painful? Just become a mere weed...?"

Don't you go eating this up too, Sofie!

On the surface, Sofie seemed like the type to fall for a cult hook, line, and sinker. She kind of had a dark cloud over her and a habit of depending on others.

"Hey, uh, it's not too late for you to go back to Princess Leyfa, you know?" I offered while watching Sofie and Roslia worship their new leader, Erin. Even as their friend, I couldn't imagine why anyone would want to join a party causing such a weird scene in public.

However, Sofie shook her head. "Nope. I like it here," she said.

She was smiling now, brighter than anything I'd ever—

"It's the dawning of the age of weeds!"

"Knock it off!" I couldn't help retorting.

Afterword

Hello, everyone. Udon Kamono here. We've reached volume 7 in the blink of an eye! That makes this the seventh afterword. There's actually been a running theme to the ones I've written so far. Since I've been lucky enough to get to publish this light novel, I wanted to use this space to shed light on the inner workings of the process since I didn't know much about it myself beforehand. (Really?) Excuses aside, I really do want to talk about the process of making a light novel this time. After I finish drafting the body of the story, I show it to my editor. At this stage, I make a round of corrections and then send it off for proofreading. At the same time, a request is sent to the illustrator for insert images, the first proofread returns for me to make fixes, and I write the afterword to send off for another round of proofreading. Then, once that's complete and the illustrations arrive, the cover design is decided and I write the bonus short stories for the bookstores.

I've rambled a bit here, but what I'm getting around to saying is that the afterword gets written before the illustrations are done. I've always mentioned my gratitude for Shizuki, but my praise is based on the images of the artwork in my head. Whenever I finally get to see the finished product, I find myself thinking, "I totally didn't praise the art enough," and, "I should have included this one part in my acknowledgments." Of course, that's just how the cookie crumbles when the process works like this. It's no one's fault, but I do always feel guilty about it.

I once mentioned this in front of Editor Soyama and Shizuki, and the former replied, "If you'd told me sooner, we could have moved the date for the afterword." It was really that simple all along? Seriously?! The woes I carried for so long were for naught. So, without further ado, I'll be praising the illustrations.

Man, they were really good this time! Let's start with the cover. I mean, that layout? It's so cool how Note is upside down, and Miya's daring smile is fantastic! Sofie's and Leyfa's desperate expressions in the upper corner are

superb too. And then there's the first interior color illustration! The nightscape is exactly as I imagined it—in fact, it's even more beautiful. Then there's the second... Wait, I'm out of space already! Next time I'll leave more than a few lines to talk about the art...

-Udon Kamono

Sofie Deanlurk

Nickname

Gear

Rapier

Party

Arrivers



Role

Knight

Skills

High Appraisal
Rarity: SR (Super Rare)
Slot Cost: 1
Effect: The ability to read information about creatures and objects within view. Also reveals skills.

Iron Wall
Rarity: SR (Super Rare)
Slot Cost: 1
Effect: Greatly increases endurance.

Protection of the Earth Spirit
Rarity: R (Rare)
Slot Cost: 1
Effect: The ability to use earth elemental spirit magic.

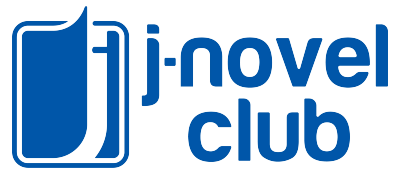
Spells
& Arts

Fuerte-Tierra-Cárcel
A binding spirit art. Borrows the power of the earth elemental Fuerte to seal foes in a stone prison. Number of targets and range varies based on the user's ability.

Fuerte-Tierra-Pilar
A support spirit art. Borrows the power of the earth elemental Fuerte to create a column that can be used for offense, defense, and mobility.

Fuerte-Tierra-Pared
A defensive spirit art. Borrows the power of the earth elemental Fuerte to create an earthen wall.

Six Thrusts
A knight art that launches a rapid flurry of strikes. The actual number of thrusts (and name of the art) varies based on the user's ability.



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Mapping: The Trash-Tier Skill That Got Me Into a Top-Tier Party: Volume 7

by Udon Kamono

Translated by Mana Z.

Edited by Megan Denton

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